Symposium

'Youth Policy Responses to the Contemporary Challenges Faced by Young People'

Prague, Czech Republic

12-14 June 2017

Pillar 1: Identity and Autonomy

Theme 2: Agency and Empowerment

Teasers

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What are we talking about?

*This theme focuses on the support young people receive in activating access to their rights especially when conditions of **discrimination and exclusion take place. It covers the policy responses** increasing youth rights through **rights-based approaches and minority rights protection and support in identity formation** leading to greater agency and empowerment of young people.*

Key issues to be discussed are:

Agency and empowerment
Identity formation
Rights-based approaches
Minority rights
Exclusion

Agency and empowerment

Agency and empowerment is helping young people to help themselves. It is a complex process whereby individuals, families, organisations and communities gain control and mastery – that is, have agency – over their lives.[1]

Increased agency and empowerment occurs when the powerless are becoming aware of the power dynamics that shape their circumstances (in Freire's words: 'critical consciousness') and develop the skills, confidence and capacity over their lives, improving equity and quality of life.[2] Empowerment also refers to bringing people who are outside the social, economic and political systems, and bringing them into the decision-making processes.[3] Empowerment involves a process to change power relations. On the one hand, it aims to enable excluded people to take initiatives, make decisions and acquire more power over their lives. At the same time, it forces social, economic and political systems to relinquish some of that power and to enable excluded people and groups to enter into negotiation over decision-making processes, thereby playing a full role in society.

Source: http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary/#empowerment

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[1] Jennings et. al, 2006, "Towards a Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment", *Journal of Community Practice* 14:1-2, p. 31-55.
[2] Rowlands, J., 1995, "Empowerment Examined", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (May 1995), p. 101-107.
[3] Council of Europe and European Union, 2017, "Empowerment", *Glossary on youth*, accessed on 30 May 2017 from http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary/#empowerment

Identity formation

Identity refers to the sense of self, of personhood, of what kind of person one is. Youth identities are fluid changeable. Psychologists agree that childhood and adolescence are the most important periods for identity formation, thus direct relevance to youth policy. A young person's identity is a social construct: e.g. feminist studies argue that gender identities must be understood in relation to the (often male) expectations of women, girls, mothers and wives. Identity is complex, because it is shared by the affiliation to different groups.

Identity formation begins in childhood and gains prominence during adolescence. Due to physical growth, puberty, and impending life choices, adolescents are faced with the necessity of integrating their prior experiences and characteristics into a single identity. To cope with the uncertainties of this stage, young people may face identity crises: over-identify with heroes and mentors, bond together in groups excluding others on the basis of real or imagined differences and marginalise others.

Sources:

Siurala, L. (2005): European framework of youth policy;

Erikson, E.H. (1968): Identity: youth and crisis; Oxford, England: Norton & Co.

Rights-based approaches

Rights-based approaches focus on empowering young people to claim, exercise and defend their rights and fulfil their responsibilities through their active participation in society. This involves encouraging mutually accountable partnerships between young people and stakeholders responsible for validating youth rights and actively working against the discrimination of young people on age or any other grounds, and towards ensuring the full inclusion of youth within society.

Source:

European Youth Forum: http://www.youthforum.org/claims/for-youth-rights/

Minority rights

Minority rights focus on granting equal rights to members of minority groups either on the basis of personal characteristics or group traits. There are very few universal legal instruments of minority right protection. They vary from country to country - even within the Council of Europe and European Union.

Early approaches to minorities began from the assumption that such social groups are always smaller in number than those belonging to the mainstream or majority in a given society. By the 1970s, feminist analysis had shown that girls and women, though outnumbering boys and men in most societies of the world, share many of the social features of minority groups – not least in terms of prejudice and discrimination.

These insights revolutionised theoretical perspectives on majority-minority relations, so that today, the term 'minority group' refers to a complex set of features that together signify distinctiveness in relation to that which is perceived as 'typical' or 'standard' in a given historical time and social space. In the same way, young people can constitute a numerical majority in the community or country but still be deprived of certain rights and face exclusion and discrimination, thus warranting additional protection through participation and empowerment mechanisms.

Source:
http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary/#minorities

Social exclusion

Social exclusion is a process involving the lack 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 equity and cohesion of society as a whole through poverty and lack of participation.

Source:
Mack. J (2017), Social Exclusion, http://www.poverty.ac.uk/definitions-poverty/social-exclusion

What are the trends and implications for the lives of young people?

The effects of the global financial and economic crisis continue to resonate strongly with young people in Europe, affecting issues of agency and empowerment:

- Inequalities growing: In the EU, unemployment among native-born youth with immigrant parents is almost 50 % higher than among other young people in the EU (EU Youth Report 2015)
- More than half of young people in Europe (57%) have the impression that, in their country, the young have been **marginalised and excluded** from economic and social life by the crisis (57%) (Eurobarometer 2016).

Questions for discussion:
- What is the awareness of youth rights among young people in your community/country?
- Accountability: can young people hold the regional/national authorities to account in your country? If so, how? If not, why?
- What are the main obstacles for young people in your community/country in accessing their rights?
- What are the policy responses and initiatives addressing youth agency and empowerment in your country/community?
- Is the general decline in trust in institutions part of an overall trend – what are trust levels regarding other institutions, including civil society, media, family and community?
- Has the refugee crisis affected the perception of minorities in your country and the policies aimed at them?

What has been done so far in Europe?

European policy-makers have dealt with issues of agency and empowerment, with references to youth rights and human rights for a few decades and there is a considerable wealth of material in this field. International norms and values in human rights and citizenship rights shaped European Institutions and European youth policies for decades. Human rights offer a normative framework for the formulation of regional and national youth policies, as well as strengthen policies by legal obligations. Youth rights are a relatively newer term but also gain recognition among policy-makers.

Effective youth policy is not possible without empowerment of young people. By introducing a concept of rights into youth policy, policy-makers acknowledge not only needs and special situation of young people, but also reaffirm their entitlements and rights. Youth policy becomes more than a good will from national governments – it becomes a legal obligation of States to respect, protect and fulfil all human rights for young people.

Youth work plays an invaluable role in empowering and engaging young people across Europe –and this is now officially recognised by the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe through the first Council of Europe **Recommendation (CM/Rec(2017)4) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work, adopted in May 2017** – according to European Youth Forum 'a historic step towards broader recognition and support for youth work and youth organisations, acknowledging the countless positive outcomes they create for individuals, their communities and for society in general'.

The issue of young people's access to rights and participation at all levels are at the heart of the Council of Europe's activities in the field of youth.

The Recommendation [CM/Rec(2016)7](#) **of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people's access to rights recommends that CoE Member States improve young people's access to rights notably by** addressing the discriminatory practices faced by many young people. Multifaceted identities and inter-sectionality of discrimination were highlighted as a particular focus. Furthermore the recommendation calls for removing any legal, administrative and practical obstacles to the right of young people to assemble peacefully and to freely form, join and be active in associations and trade unions and developing youth policies at all levels to promote and facilitate all young people's access to rights more effectively, with special emphasis on education, training, health and social care, precarious situations and participation in social and political life.

The [Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#) is one of the key policy documents for youth active participation in Europe. The Charter recognizes that all local and regional sectoral policies should have a youth dimension and identifies consultation and co-operation with young people and their representatives as an essential principle in youth policy implementation.

Accountability is another important element of the human rights and youth rights frameworks. Governments need to be accountable for their actions: to show, explain and justify how they have fulfilled obligations towards young people. There are a number of different types of accountability mechanisms in Europe, including: the [European Court of Human Rights](#), the [European Committee of Social Rights](#), the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#) and the [European Parliament](#).

The [EU Youth Strategy](#) underlines that 'European Youth Policy cooperation should be firmly anchored in the international system of human rights'. While [Agenda 2020: The future of the Council of Europe Youth Policy](#) identifies 'young people's full enjoyment of human rights and human dignity' as a priority for the Council of Europe's youth policy and action.

The European Union's youth policies have particular focus on young people who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or socially excluded. The [Resolution of the Council of the European Union on the participation of young people with fewer opportunities](#) encourages prioritising young people in the most vulnerable situations when implementing regional and national youth related strategies.

The Council of Europe committed resources to a number of minority groups and areas. The Action Plan on Building Inclusive Societies (2016-2019) highlights the need to support social inclusion and participation strategies for and with young migrants and refugees and involving the local communities.

The Roma Youth Action Plan is a response of the Council of Europe to challenges faced by Roma young people in Europe, particularly in relation to their empowerment, participation in policy decision-making processes and structures at European level, and multiple realities of discrimination. The Plan gives priority to human rights and intercultural dialogue as responses to discrimination and antigypsyism, together with the development and capacity building of Roma youth organisations and movements. Training and capacity building has, thus, an important role in the Roma Youth Action Plan, not only because of what individual Roma youth leaders may learn and develop individually, but also and especially by what they will experience and do together. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights works on a number of minority themes that affect the well-being of minority youth including LGBTI rights and migration.

How is the youth sector tackling this issue (youth work, policy and research)?

EYF - The **European Youth Forum** has recently launched a campaign 'For Youth Rights' and an online tool that allows young people and youth organisations to learn and act for youth rights.