When family support fails:
reducing the risk of social exclusion of young people

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The research has revealed two directions of youth policy challenges: (1) the reduction of the risks of social exclusion for children and youth from an early age; and (2) successful transitions into independent living of youth with low personal resources and facing institutional and structural constraints, assured by the development of integrative policy measures.

Between 2008 and 2011 a cluster of five research projects on the social inclusion of young people was financed by the Socio-Economic Sciences and Humanities Programme (SSH) of the EU 7th Framework Programme (EU 7FP). Based on the results of these research projects a policy review "Social inclusion of socially excluded youth: more opportunities, better access and higher solidarity" was written by Dagmar Kutsar and Helena Helve. In order to complete their work they analysed the final reports, policy briefs, working papers and published articles based on the five research projects. Two associated experts, Professor Beatrix Niemeyer and Dr Ewa Krzaklewska, members of the Pool of the European Youth Researchers for the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth were involved in the finalisation of the review.

The young people who were the subject of the EU 7FP research projects[1] on social inclusion, analysed in the policy review by Kutsar and Helve,[2] are characterised by disadvantaged backgrounds. They often come from dysfunctional, poor or socially isolated families; they lack family support, and/or have low dominant language proficiency. The research revealed that the limited life opportunities of these young people exclude them from fully participating in society in terms of further education and entrance to the labour market. Even if they have ambitious goals concerning education or professional life, they can only achieve these (if at all) in the face of significant odds, due to fewer opportunities, more limited access to services and low solidarity in the relationships between these young people and the wider society.

In contemporary European societies an increased dependency by youth on their parents has become apparent. Support from the immediate family appears to be critical during the transition to working life, independent living and family formation. Setbacks in transitions (or yo-yo transitions) result in young people needing to carefully navigate between periods of autonomy and dependence on their families.

The research confirmed that the capacities of families play a powerful role in shaping youth outcomes, starting from their early years. Educational prospects after compulsory education have roots in participation in quality pre-school education, and in early educational allocation systems. This causes an educational divide among children and youth. Roma children, as well as children of migrant background and poor families, are usually highly affected by poor access to pre-school facilities and allocated to more disadvantageous segments of the education systems. Young people in and from public care are negatively affected by multiple changes of schools. Placement instability has a negative impact on their achievements at school and diminishes their prospects of continuing in post-compulsory education. Open access to education for all children and young people from an early age should be politically acknowledged as their social right and receive relevant policy responses.

The policy review of Kutsar and Helve touches on an issue of social comparisons that young people, as a rule, make, but in the case of youth with disadvantaged backgrounds this phenomenon uncovers a negative outcome for them. In effect, they feel disfavoured, deprived, or set apart from peers in the school environment. The accompanied labelling of children and young people by professionals – teachers, social workers and others – results in confirmation of the low self-esteem and undervaluation of the importance of education in the young person's life. As an example, after leaving care, the lack of encouragement from school and care professionals puts young people on a track towards immature transitions to independent living, namely prioritisation of financial independence through work above further education, which later limits their professional opportunities and leads to lower socio-economic positions. However, many young people in care, the homeless and with migrant backgrounds fully understand the importance of education and are frustrated by the obstacles they have to overcome after dropping out or finishing compulsory education. Namely they are in need of support from trusted adults who would be a stable point of encouragement and counselling and would broaden their educational perspectives.

National policies in Europe differ, in particular through the division of responsibilities between the individual, the family, the state, the market and the third sector. They also differ in the extent to which welfare provisions, education systems, employment policies and migration policies support individual aspirations. In the Mediterranean countries the reliance on parents as welfare providers is the highest; young people are staying at home longer than ever, and longer compared to other European countries. However, even the universalistic Nordic welfare system that mostly relies on state support welcomes the presence of family support.

The policy review calls for more recognition for young people with disadvantaged backgrounds in state policies. These groups of young people (such as homeless, in care or migrants) are often not sufficiently or accurately represented in national statistics and reporting. They are overlooked in policies and lack intervention practices. The researchers express the need for caution when reading the published statistics, especially concerning the population groups whose particular circumstances have not yet secured enough political recognition. The available statistics may fail to reveal the full picture of the processes of inclusion and exclusion among young immigrants for example. The unemployment rates can be lower for immigrant young people than for indigenous young people, according to official statistics, because immigrants often work in the informal sector where they have fewer rights and are thus excluded legally. The collection of statistics annually, at national and local levels using EU indicators, about both the current situation of vulnerable groups and the most recent improvements in the field, is essential for reasoned policy making.

The groups of socially excluded youth (the migrants, homeless, those in public care) face a glass ceiling against their potential aspirations and positive life careers due to their disadvantaged backgrounds and legal and institutional barriers.

The recommendations for breaking educational barriers stress early-age prevention programmes and targeted interventions that can be used as functional tools for overcoming the biographical disadvantages of young people and support the creation of their personal resources. Interventions should be directed towards ensuring access to and retention in education irrespective of the material resources of the family or their ethnic or migrant background. In the case of migrant youth, additional neighbourhood-based actions of informal and non-formal learning addressed to all ages and for both migrant and non-migrant community members, are suggested as means of broadening solidarity within society and for linking migrant or ethnic minority families with the wider community.

Young people themselves display capabilities and resilience that could be empowered with political measures. The promotion of access to social rights of civic and political participation can contribute to the promotion of equal opportunities and social inclusion. With the internalisation of these rights comes a sense of empowerment that can help young people to realise their potential, if institutionally supported. Civil society organisations uncover underexploited capacities to involve young people, and to develop subsidy schemes and scholarships for young people who have been actively engaged. Political parties can consciously recruit migrant youth with the objective of developing relevant political issues and agendas and carrying out campaigns.

To summarise, the policy review based on the research projects revealed existing institutional weaknesses – the presence of exclusive labour market and educational policies, the underexploited role of the civil society and, last but not least, a weak or missing link of welfare provision with education and labour market policies. Education, employment, equal rights and opportunities for citizenship, participation and solidarity between youth and society are the key agents in the capacity of European youth policy to achieve improvement in the inclusion of European young people at risk. Securing their acceptance and support at the level of national politics remains an important political objective. Realisation of this objective will allow recognition of the educational, economic and political needs, as special transitional needs of these young people, who require additional institutional support for relieving their disadvantages and broadening their life chances.

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- *Take into special consideration the needs of youth with disadvantages (those without any or with poor and limited family support, young people in or from public care, those with ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds), when drawing up social inclusion, education, youth, family and childhood policies.*
- *Improve collaborative efforts of schools, welfare agencies, vocational training and labour market institutions, NGOs and the families of youth with the aim of reducing their yo-yo effect (dropping out of school, college course and training).*
- *Establish an effective partnership of key institutional agents (education, justice, social services) to support children and youth with weak or missing family support.*
- *Recognise the inequality of educational opportunities as a children's rights issue and intensify efforts to reduce differences in the conditions and quality of schooling for children with disadvantaged backgrounds.*