

Social Economy and the young: an employment alternative

We are not what we are
We are what we do
In order to change what we are

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"Emancipation" is one of the most important sociological concepts for defining the young in our societies. It is usually interpreted as being centred around four main areas: **economic independence, creating one's own space** separate from one's parental home, **individual management of resources, and personal autonomy**.

It goes without saying that **employment**, as a building block for one's economic base, serves as the foundation for emancipation. It provides the transition towards adult life and allows for the individual to assume responsibilities. Through employment, a young person can develop a dynamic process of freedom and independence. Nevertheless, nowadays (at least in Spain) taking into account the characteristics of the labour market, this process is in crisis. Why? This article does not aim to provide an in-depth description of the labour market, however it does aim to highlight some influential aspects, their implications for entering the job market, and how this factor has serious repercussions on the ability to become independent and achieve emancipation. See note¹:

❖ Young people of working age represent nearly 60% of the labour market as employed persons or unemployed persons. Of this sizeable collective, 21% of the young people eligible for employment are out of work. This is to say that almost half the total number of unemployed people in Spain are under 30 years of age (approximately 1 million unemployed young people).

❖ Compared to other Europeans, young people in Spain demonstrate the highest dropout rate in training activities beyond what is strictly compulsory education. Moreover, they represent the collective in which the gap between the subject studied and the occupation followed is the widest.

❖ The rate of temporary employment in Spain is triple that of the rest of Europe. Over half (57%) of young salaried workers occupy temporary jobs. In fact, 50% of the total temporary workers in Spain are under 30 years of age.

❖ We must also add that the young earn lower salaries compared to other adult workers. This impedes their access to buying or even renting a home. In addition, the cost of housing is rising uncontrollably on a quarterly basis, a factor that also affects the geographic mobility of the labour market for the young².

❖ As a result of the aforementioned statistics drawn from the last report on The Youth, written by the Institute of Youth in Spain, the average age of emancipation for the young in our country is around 30 years of age. In our opinion, this figure is extremely worrying.

It could be reasonably argued that we are experiencing a "crisis of the young" due to the fact that the systems of society that normally allow young people to make the transition to an adult life are blocked. This situation obliges us to propose alternatives for the young that aim to recompose and provide itineraries for obtaining employment based on **autonomy** and **responsibility**. Nevertheless, these itineraries must not neglect the structural responsibilities that lie on governments and community policies.

The fight against youth unemployment requires us to research new and creative forms of support that merge existing alternatives. The Social Economy in Europe (associations, cooperatives and not-for profit organisations) is indisputably growing. Together, these elements provide an enormous potential for creating employment, even in a situation of crisis. *"These organisations currently represent an economic and social reality in many countries that is not to be underestimated, although they receive little recognition. It is estimated that this sector represents a total of 8 520 000 jobs, which is to say, 6,45% of total employment and 7,78% of paid employment. In addition, if we figure that the number of full time posts is equivalent to volunteer work, it could be estimated that 10% of the work force is employed in the third system."*³ However, young people are unaware of this reality, and it is the responsibility of all concerned to provide the processes that allow for raising awareness and expansion.

Young people participating in projects and initiatives in the context of the European YOUTH programme are not exempt from the aforementioned problems, although they have demonstrated, through their characteristics and knowledge acquired, skills that allow them to overcome obstacles. If we were to highlight some key aspects involved in the Youth Initiative projects as far as employment ability is concerned, we would include the following:

- Launching a youth initiative requires, in itself, an integral process of self-training. It is obvious that this learning also contributes to improving the level of employment opportunity (or employability) for the young.

- From the optimum results of a youth project, future professional activities may be derived that are always an implicit aim of the original project. Obviously, any group initiative "sows the seeds" for future professional projects and future entrepreneurs.

- The success of a youth project generates a direct and positive affect on the promoter group as well as on the local community in which it was carried out. It lays the foundation of the proper synergies for later launching other initiatives, among which can be included (why not?) self-employment initiatives.



by Ernesto García López



- The majority of the initiatives have been self-managed by the groups themselves. In almost all cases, the final result has led to a concrete "product" (information for the young, magazines, videos, services...). It seems clear that the combination of self-management and product provides an ideal base for identifying future entrepreneurs, people who are willing to launch collective self-employment initiatives that will allow them to join the labour market and to take risks.

Various studies show that many young people base their orientation towards the job market on the model of job opportunities as hired employees. Furthermore, self-employment is identified as starting a company, an idea which, to young people, seems "light years away" from their reality. However, young people who perceive the option of self-employment as a world of uncertainty, don't have access to the appropriate **information and training necessary** for succeeding in these initiatives. Young people do not trust that the proper support will be available to them for launching self-employment initiatives. Moreover, groups of young entrepreneurs lack **specific support methodologies** that provide the management and feasibility of projects. However, there is more than enough demand for them to be generated, thus, the ground has been laid for developing self-employment options.

Advancing in this direction means opening young people's paths towards emancipation, allowing them to recover their position and influence in society. Labour market integration does not only involve acting as an intermediary between job supply (enterprises) and demand (users). It also means building independent and autonomous projects in which young people are the main authors of their futures.

With this aim in mind, the **Unión de Cooperativas Madrileñas de Trabajo Asociado** (Spain) launched a project that belongs to Action 5 (Large Scale European projects) called **Business Feasibility For The Young**. This project was launched as a joint venture with various European partners, in France (Association Objectif Emploi, Saint-Denis), Germany (Werk-Statt-Schule, Hannover) and Italy (Istituto di Formazione Cooperativa, Rome). This Project has been developing since the end of 2001 and continuing throughout the course of 2002. At this juncture, we would like to provide an overall synthesis of what this Project's main objectives and actions have been.

OBJECTIVES

- ❖ To identify and define strategies for linking or converting a youth association or initiative into an employment project, specifically, a project of collective self-employment.
- ❖ To create a methodological model that provides support processes for converting young people's group initiatives into business projects. In order to ensure young people's integration into the labour market, this transition is designed to be carried out by applying the formula of Associated Workers Cooperatives to their initiatives.
- ❖ To ensure that young people who participate in youth initiative projects are aware of the social economy's potential, particularly that of associated workers cooperatives as an employment alternative.
- ❖ To provide the project's participants with access to information and services that improve their skills and knowledge in order to promote collective self-employment.
- ❖ To create, through a joint effort between the entities promoting the project and the young people as participants, on-line self-training material for youth associations on launching social economy initiatives. This material is called "Taking The Plunge"

THE ACTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN CARRIED OUT HAVE BEEN...

- 1 Various **SEMINARS** held in each participating country between associations and cooperatives. The aim of these seminars was to

reflect on and learn in detail about the beneficial connection between cooperative self-employment and youth association initiatives. In these seminars, concrete mechanisms were drawn up for gathering ideas that later lead to creating on-line self-training materials. Participation in the seminars totalled 120 young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who belong to youth associations, group initiatives, the unemployed...

- 2 Through joint efforts, an **ON-LINE SELF TRAINING MANUAL FOR YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS ON LAUNCHING SOCIAL ECONOMY INITIATIVES** has been created. This manual is extremely practical, concrete, and linked to the daily reality experienced by associations. This material is available by visiting the UCMTA's web site www.ucmta.org and has been translated into German, French, Spanish, and Italian. It was created by all partners involved in the project and has been enhanced by the participation of young people who visited the aforementioned web site.

In the future, we intend to continue this action and improve the Material that has been created by adapting its content to other geographical and linguistic areas. This task of adaptation and improvement will be carried out throughout the next few years.

- 3 **ACCREDITATION OF THE MANUAL** was made by including business ideas that arose through working with associations and groups of young people participating in Youth Initiatives through the European Youth Programme. Two validation levels were carried out. The first took place through the direct participation of five young women in Madrid (Spain) who worked on various content areas proposed in the material. The second level was an on-line validation with a cultural association in Barcelona, that reviewed the Manual and wrote a proposal for its improvement. This validation has served to modify contents and assess to what extent the material is useful and can be applied to other experiences.

- 4 Following the same guidelines as work carried out in Madrid, the **EUROPEAN PARTNERS** carried out the same actions in their countries (seminars with youth associations). Thus, a connection was made between entities and European experiences in promoting employment through the framework of the social economy.

- 5 Lastly, a **GLOBAL EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT** was made in order to identify which actions were or were not successful. This evaluation aided us in improving further actions and identifying potential future actions that can strengthen the relationship between associations and cooperative enterprises.

*For an in-depth qualitative analysis of the characteristics of the job market and the young in Spain, we advise a careful reading of the text "Los hijos de la desregulación. Jóvenes, usos y abusos en los consumos de drogas" (Translated title: The Children of deregulation. The young, use and abuse of drug consumption) by Fernando de Gonde Madrid: GREPAT - Quix Roja, 1999.

*Labour Union Information booklet: "Los retos del empleo y el paro en España tras la cumbre de Barcelona". (Translated title: The challenges of employment and unemployment in Spain after the Barcelona summit) Comisiones Obreras. Madrid 2002.

*Communication from the Commission to the Board of Directors, European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, and the Regional Committee: "Acción local a favor del empleo: una dimensión local para la Estrategia Europea de Empleo" (Translated title: Local action for employment: a local dimension for European Employment Strategy) Brussels 7-4-2000

For those interested in more in-depth information on these subjects or who seek further information on this Project, we may be contacted through:

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