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THE FORMATION OF CHILD AND YOUTH POLICY IN FINLAND

– A CASE OF THE FIRST DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2007–2011

Abstract

In Finland, knowledge transfer among actors in the youth field is fairly active. The idea of an integrated youth policy expands the actor network of that area. Programmatic steering as a governing mechanism is one central attempt to utilise and manage this network. The Finnish Youth Act (4§, 2006) requires the state government to design a youth policy development programme every four years. In this chapter, we explore the first planning process for a programme based on deliberative and network governance arrangements.

When compared internationally, the Finnish youth field – administrated by the Youth Policy Division in the Ministry of Education and Culture – is often seen as exemplary for its legislation and interactive approach. Knowledge transfer and collaboration structures among youth policy and youth work actors are fairly strong between the administrators, practitioners (in the municipalities and civil society organisations) and the researchers (Hoikkala & Suurpää 2005; [Mapping on national knowledge networks 2012, 6](#)). When youth policy is defined as a cross-sectoral and integrated field – including education and training, employment and the labour market, health, housing, leisure, social welfare etc. – the actor network becomes extended beyond the youth field. Ideally, all relevant ministries and a wide range of other societal actors are needed for formulating and implementing youth policies.

This vision of an integrated youth policy has obviously oriented the making of the youth policy planning as statutory in Finland. The Youth Act (4§, 2006) requires the state government to design a youth policy development programme every four years.ⁱ The interconnection between the planning network and political decision-making – the government – has been ensured by the act, as well as the follow-up, of the programme. According to the Youth Act (2006) and its preparatory material, the main aims of the programme are to improve the living conditions of young people, develop their services, strengthen multi-agency collaboration, get political attention and resources for these and, implicitly, enhance the participation and social integration of young people. All in all, strategic and programmatic steering has become a central governing mechanism in the Finnish government; influential neighbouring strategies are for example the Education and Research

Development Plan (2011) and the National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care (2012).

So far this statutory youth policy development programme has been drafted twice, for 2007–2011 and for [2012–2015](#), and named as The Child and Youth Policy (hereafter CYP) Programme. Planning of the programme has aimed at crossing administrative borders, joining knowledge and initiatives of different societal actors. Thus the planning processes have been based on deliberative and network governanceⁱⁱ arrangements. Yet, many challenges remain in defining central youth policy aims and coordinating them within different administrative branches and governing levels. One challenge originates from the life course approach, which in this context means that youth policy is combined with child and family policies. The governmental CYP programmes concern young people aged 0–28, forming a third of the population, and this makes the scope of the programme extensive (for a detailed analysis of the programme steering and challenges of the Finnish CYP, see Määttä & Eriksson 2013).

In this paper, we explore the first planning process for the CYP programme, taking into account actors, the forms of network governance used, the rationales of CYP aims and the relation of programmatic steering to the municipal level. The analysis is based on data gathered in 2008 by an e-mail enquiry sent to those 97 actors who were involved in the drafting of the development programme in 2007. We received 55 answers from 50 organisations. The other data comprise group interviews with officials who took part in and were mainly responsible for planning municipal child and youth welfare policies in five municipalities (see Määttä 2010; Määttä & Komonen 2011). In Finland, as well as in other Nordic countries, municipalities have considerable autonomy and responsibility for policy alignments and service delivery. More information about the implementation of the CYP programme can be found in [the statutory report of the programme](#) (Nuora 2011, **pp 32–35 in English**).

Network governance in the Child and Youth Policy programme formation

Network governance constitutes a model to replace direct state regulation and control with less hierarchical, more flexible governing methods allowing more interdependent relationships between the state and civil society. By strengthening networked planning, the state hopes to consult and coordinate different stakeholders in the policy processes and thus increase its credibility as a meta-governor. Despite the rise of new powerful players and the transformation of the democratic decision-making system as a result of both global and local developments, the state still retains the

central position as a network builder, an activator and manipulator of the networks (Kooiman 2003; Hudson et al. 2007; Klijn & Edelenbos 2012). However, the state is continually struggling between the demands of broader citizen participation and opening administrative processes to the citizenry, on the one hand, and the need to maintain administrative functionality and to relieve the democracy overload, on the other.

The first Government's CYP Programme for 2007–2011 was prepared by a large network of CYP actors. The committee of the programme was managed by the Youth Policy Division. All the ministries were represented in the committee. The preparation of the programme was supported by a broad contact network in which many expert bodies, research and development institutions, civil society, industrial and labour market organisations were represented, as well as municipal professionals and representatives of young people. A draft for the programme was also introduced in and received feedback from the eight regional seminars and two web-discussions in the government discussion forum at www.Otakantaa.fi. Theoretically at least, every citizen had a possibility to influence the process through online consultations provided via official web pages. Before approval by the government, the programme was also discussed many times at the ministerial level (Programme 2007).

The respondents of the e-mail enquiry evaluated the programme planning phase mainly positively: it was discursive, broad-based and took into consideration the opinions of non-governmental organisations and young people themselves. Yet, some organisations and professional groups felt that they should have had more influence on the programme. Concerning the objectives of the CYP programme, respondents predominantly emphasised goals close to their own agendas. When they were asked to describe the situation of the current Finnish CYP, their premises became wider and they named policy objectives more independently. In the context of the service system, certain challenges were outstanding: the resources and quality of child welfare were described as inadequate and in need of rapid upgrades, inter-agency collaboration was reported to require improvement both on the ministry level and in municipal services and a preventive approach rather than late interventions was demanded as a working method. When it comes to the living conditions of young people, the respondents stressed the following challenges: a) increased inequality of youngsters in terms of financial situation, wellbeing and access to services, b) problematic transitions of young people to post-16 education and work, c) children's needs for parental and adult care, instead of getting along by themselves and d) the possibilities of children and young

people to participate in decision-making and services. These themes encapsulate many of the key questions brought up by various policy discourses concerning young people in Finland.

The implementation of the CYP programme was questioned by the respondents for various reasons: the programme was seen as an ideal paper that develops, improves and promotes many things but it lacked clear priority, responsibility, resourcing and follow-up structures. Yet, there were many advances accomplished beyond the integrative planning process: the programme helped in grasping comprehensive child and youth issues and promoted multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination of services – things that are not politically sensitive or arouse opposition.

The national steering from the municipal officeholders' point of view

In the group interviews of the municipal officers, active discussions were held on the national steering by programmes. It was both commended and criticised. These positive effects were mentioned: the national programmes (and statutory obligations to make a municipal plan) can raise the importance of child and youth matters in the municipal decision-making where they compete for attention with other issues. They can also speed up and support the municipal development efforts and justify to the municipal decision-makers the need for resourcing the services. The programmes can also give credit to decisions and policies carried out on the local level. Through them it is also possible to get some funding for practical work. On the other hand, the various sources of national steering, the lack of coordination between them and different demands, laws and wishes for programme work on the local level were considered problematic. The steering was also considered to some extent both idealistic and too detailed. The development where the state increases the statutory responsibilities of the municipalities without knowing their resources was criticised. The downside of the intensive national steering can be that the municipalities would follow the requirements and measurements of the state but locally more important matters may be left undone.

To conclude, governmental CYP programme work can invoke and partly prompt or steer societal responses to youth issues, but most of the practical decisions and actions depend on the local level elaboration of the policy alignments. In the case of the first CYP programme, the planning process was mainly regarded as successful due to the inclusive nature, but a clear vision of a common direction was not acquired. The need for prioritising policy goals was one lesson learned from the process (see also Nuora 2011, 33).

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ⁱ The Child Welfare Act (2007, 12§) requires the municipalities to draw up a plan for the welfare of children and youth and for the organisation and development of the services.

ⁱⁱ Network governance denotes to a way of using the authority, knowledge and resources of different societal actors and initiate partnership arrangements between them in policymaking and service delivery (Klijin & Edelenbos 2012).