



Mapping of barriers to social inclusion for young people in vulnerable situations – Expert meeting

Summary Report

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7 October, 2014

European Youth Centre
Strasbourg
30 September – 02 October 2014

Building on a draft report commissioned by the Partnership and produced by three experts during the summer, the Expert seminar sought to interrogate a range of issues and assumptions concerning 'Barriers to social inclusion for young people in vulnerable situations' – and the needs in terms of policy revision that flow from that analysis. Perhaps the most contentious issue remained the balance to be struck between the structural forces of exclusion and the (lack of) capacity of individuals to overcome them; put another way, the distinction between young people in vulnerable *situations*, and young people as a vulnerable *group*. In reality, of course, the two are inextricably intertwined – reflecting the classical sociological debate between structure and agency – but the expert seminar was emphatic that the focus needed to rest firmly on structural barriers that others, and policy, could and should overcome, albeit in conjunction with more individualised support and intervention. This position derived from a concern that, increasingly, public policy placed too much focus on individual capability and the lack of resourcefulness and resilience of young people, in effect 'blaming the victim', at the expense of recognising the structural and institutional practices and processes that deny access, opportunity and rights to significant segments of, if not all groups of young people. In other words, following C. Wright Mills¹, the expert group were committed to ensuring that seemingly 'private troubles' were turned into 'public issues'. These ranged from initial barriers to inclusion, such as poverty or ethnicity, through more institutional barriers blocking access and achievement in education and employment, often linked both by cause and effect to (poor) health and housing, and carrying on through to non-participation in volunteering, voting and other forms of engagement in civil society. Of particular concern was the interaction between accumulated disadvantage (sometimes known as 'conjoint inequalities'!) on the one hand and how, over time, this is compounded – but could be reversed – by further structural barriers faced over the life course.

The expert group was composed of a diverse dynamic combination of academics, policy makers and practitioners from the youth field and other fields related to social inclusion, with country representation from across the Council of Europe member states. It followed a programme of robust debate, dissecting many 'taken for granted' concepts (not least 'citizenship' and 'culture'), endeavouring to find suitable balances in the relationships between the six topics in focus (education, employment, health, housing, citizenship and culture), and trying to follow the motto of war photographers, 'if you want to get a good picture, you've gotta get close'.

There was no explicit focus on the role of youth work in overcoming some of the identified barriers, though inevitably this was discussed. It will, however, be the primary focus of a major conference in Malta at the end of November 2014, for which this seminar was a preparatory event.

In conclusion, as the expert group sought to find some shared positions and perspectives, there appeared to be some general agreement that the challenge was how to ensure and enable *all* young people in Europe to 'find their place' in society and full adult citizenship, through both the extension of social rights and the exercise of responsibilities. The removal of significant barriers to social inclusion will support those at risk of exclusion to find a place in learning, assist the pursuit of healthy lifestyles, find relevant training and a job, find a place to live and ultimately find an active place in civic and community life.

¹ Wright Mills, C. (1959), *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press