

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



Analytical paper on youth participation in a digital world Economic sphere and working life

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Introduction

The purpose of this analytical paper is to summarize the state of affairs in the debates around the topic of participation in the digitalized world focusing on economic sphere and working life of youth in Europe. The paper strives to reflect on current challenges and opportunities in the field as well as to state further needs for development of policy and practice.

While it is widely accepted that economic growth relies on research, innovation and successful transformation of businesses, it is important to note that young people are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in economic trends. Since the labour market in Europe has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, the demands of globalization and the move towards a high-skilled, more service based economy has created many new challenges for workers in Europe, particularly young people.

Accordingly, available data reveal that there has been a great deal of political rhetoric about preparing, equipping and 'skilling-up' young people for the knowledge-based economy. The old beliefs and orthodoxies concerning the labour market have been replaced by such concepts as 'lifelong learning', 're-skilling' and 'flexibility'. Flexibilities can be required in many key areas: skills; attitudes; time/working hours; conditions of employment; work-life balance etc. It also takes many forms. The concept of "sliced life" (Lauritzen, cited in Williamson 2006) – the need to simultaneously learn, earn and live – has also been identified as a particularly vital issue in the case of contemporary youth (Williamson 2006: 14-15).

Furthermore, this paper acknowledges the current economic outlook and the collapse in demand for young workers have hindered the chances of young people successfully moving from education to work. This transition is now fraught with *insecurity and risks*, as getting a first job is a major challenge in the majority of the EU Member States. Access to quality education, training and apprenticeships schemes are also a question of concern in respect to *youth's capacity to choose independently* a life project and as well for the level with which these schemes are driven

both ways, being decided by those shaping the labour market structure and young people (Eurofound, 2011). Consequently, *the risks of a delayed process of transition* to labour market has a severe impact on life projects of young people in the long-run, as it does affect their access to social security schemes, professional development and, not the least, the self-esteem and resilience.

However, it is widely accepted that *young people* hold the key to Europe's future dynamism and prosperity, assuming that their talents, energy and creativity will help Europe to grow and become more competitive as we move beyond the economic and financial crisis. Acknowledging that it is of critical macroeconomic importance for Europe to boost the number of people with the *appropriate skills* (which is especially true today as digital technologies are transforming every area of economic life), it is important to stress that, paradoxically, Europe is facing a significant and growing shortage of the people capable of leading innovation to capitalize on advances in digital technologies, despite the high levels of unemployment.

Reflecting on facts and figures: What went wrong?!

As previously mentioned, there are number of evidences showing that recent economic crisis has had disastrous implications for young people in terms of their employment, social inclusion and ability to lead dignified and autonomous lives. Although it has decreased – from more than 23% in 2013 to less than 21,4% in July 2015 – the *youth unemployment rate* is still very high in the EU (with peaks of more than 40% in several countries).

Importantly, the EU youth unemployment rate is *more than double the overall unemployment rate* (20% compared with 9%) and masks big differences between countries: there is a gap of more than 40 percentage points between the Member State with the lowest rate of youth unemployment (Germany at 7%) and the Member States with the highest rates, Greece (50%) and Spain (49%). Furthermore, more than *7 million people* in the 15-24 age group are *neither in employment nor in education or training (NEETs)*, while 11% of those aged 18-24 are *early school leavers*¹.

Even before the crisis hit, labour market segmentation was identified as a major problem in many Member States, so one can claim that today's situation just reflects a set of serious structural problems. Very often, for example, high youth unemployment rates co-exist with increased difficulties in filling vacancies which points to the existence of *labour market mismatches*, due to inadequate skills, limited geographic mobility or inadequate wage conditions.

The conditions of *youth employment* in general have worsened in Europe due in particular to the deteriorated economic situation and the financial and economic crisis proving that the young are at much greater risk in terms of *precariousness*. Having in mind that the right to decent work and protection against unemployment are fundamental human rights, quality-employment plays crucial role in providing preconditions for the autonomy and wellbeing of youth in Europe and throughout the world (EYF 2013). Unfortunately, the evidence show that *discrimination against*

¹ Source: Eurostat, July 2015

young people in the labour market, as well as in the provision of services, is a pervasive reality in Europe: young people are discriminated against on the basis of their age as well as other individual characteristics - real or perceived - including gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnic origin, disability, religious beliefs or social and educational background².

Furthermore, as a result of growing youth unemployment, young people are experiencing increased levels of *poverty and social exclusion*, and there is a widening economic gap between older and younger generations. The growing income gaps and standard of living between generations has increased *social tensions* and has lead to political unrest in many parts of Europe.

Therefore, the subject of youth employment has received especially close attention of the European officials mostly because of its correlation with social exclusion and the destabilizing effect this can have on society at large. The issue of *youth empowerment, agency and participation* are therefore central to any discussion of *youth employment policy* and the future of work today. It is proclaimed that young people should not be treated as the passive objects of policy concern. Rather, they should be reconstructed as active agents in working out solutions to social problems such as youth unemployment.

The concept and perspectives on youth transition to working life

The literature provides number of evidence that integration of young people into society has *traditionally* been seen as the result of a linear, institutionalized sequence of steps: education and/ or training, after which young people were considered ready to meet the demands of employment, which in turn would have positioned them in certain occupations: these symbolize a full citizenship status. These are the basic elements of the *standard life course model* that was constructed around an adult status based on paid work and the family (Chisholm 2011). In contemporary modern societies, however, young people's transitions to adulthood in general and to work in particular have lost their linear nature. Most importantly, growing attention is posed on the fact that young people's '*navigations*', and '*trajectories*' need to be understood in terms of *fluidity* and *change*³.

The picture is however more complex than the *traditional view* would have entailed. Transitions into and through the labour market are important milestones for young people, but they are not the only troublesome transition young people must face, as they are concurrently engaged in navigating education and training - at times, though, they experience none of these, as in the case of NEETs.

The literature shows that a major source of diversification among youth in contemporary society is the *fragmentation of life course transitions* (Chisholm 1997) marked with *de-standardized* and prolonged pathways that not only take longer to complete but are also *individualized* and often very *complex*. These transitions have de-coupled, they follow different

² Eurostat, *Gender Pay Gap Statistics* (March 2013),
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics.

³ There is plenty of literature illustrating and discussing these concepts. For an easily available text, see Chisholm et al. (2011).

rhythms and logics – they lead to fragmented lives and transitions, which individuals have to reconcile in the attempt of balancing their identities (Bauman, 2001).

Besides, a clear distinction between *dependency and autonomy*, and between youth and adulthood, which has been central for the standard biography for many young people, does not correspond to young people's subjective experiences anymore or to their current or future real life situation (Cuzzocrea, Magaraggia 2013). Increasingly, they live in situations of partial *dependency* and may alternatively be looked at as young adults rather than youth.

Moreover, under conditions of individualised and fragmented transitions, *subjectivity* plays an increasingly crucial role, as individuals must integrate decisions into their life plans (Coles, 1995; MacDonald, 1998). The increased relevance of young people's subjectivity in constructing their biographies locates the concept of de-standardized transitions at the centre of the relationship between *structure and agency* (Giddens, 1984), i.e. between the capacities of young people to elaborate their own trajectories and the conditions they face in their contexts of reference.

De-standardised transitions often represent a *challenge* not only for young people themselves, but also *for policies* addressing youth transitions which are sometimes highly contradictory. As a response, government and policies of public institutions try to turn them into *institutionalised trajectories* with formal structures and predictable outcomes. There is wide acknowledgement that for young people this may represent a dilemma since, on one hand they find that the trajectories that are provided by the institutions do not correspond to their actual life situations. On the other, their abilities may not correspond to the actual demand of the labour market, making highly individualized trajectories possible only to a minority who have fairly good access to resources and, also, skills and courage (Kovacheva, 1998; du Bois-Reymonds, 1998).

The dilemma between young people's transition experiences and transition policies however has been conceptualised in the literature as "*misleading trajectories*" (EGRIS 2001). This definition refers to a comprehensive understanding of social integration in which systemic success (qualifications, jobs, income etc.) and subjective satisfaction (experience of recognition and motivation) are interrelated. It has been argued that policies have to be *flexible* enough to provide contextualised solutions to individual cases. Furthermore, the individual contexts can only be assessed and considered appropriately with regard to subjective dimensions if the individuals concerned are *actively involved* in the definition of problems, objectives and needs regarding their own biographies. Consequently, young people's *active participation* is a central prerequisite of policies aiming at young people's social and economic integration, as underlined by Walther et al. (2002).

Policy responses

As young people are a strategic group in order to have an integrated society as a whole, problems like youth unemployment or disengagement with formal institutions have led to increase efforts in producing programmes aimed at reducing transition-related risks at the European level. Yet, several policies and programmes come to be structured around a concept of social integration that is *narrowly interpreted* on the basis of a labour market centred view, a perspective which does not take sufficiently into account the complexity of young people's lives.

Current work being done across Europe therefore suggests that the integration of policies for young people have to be structured in a way that allows young people's *active participation* in the shape of their transitions to work. While the current policy debate is being focused on enabling young people to move into the labour market, *other aspects of youth transitions* to adulthood have been emphasized, as confirmed in the principles of the Youth Department Action plan (2014 -2015), stating that '*transition to adulthood encompasses more processes than just access to the labour market for young people*'.

Along the same lines, the Report from the Consultative meeting '*Addressing challenges to transition to working life and autonomy of young people in Europe*' (held in February 2014), states that The Youth Department of the Council of Europe claims to strive to further strengthen the work of the member states governments, youth organizations, and youth workers in this area following *guiding principles* such as *human rights based approach*; addressing youth transition in the *wider perspective* and going beyond the focus on youth employment; undertaking *constant needs assessment* and *fostering dialogue among stakeholders*; putting special attention on *the needs of vulnerable groups*, and promoting a *cross-sectorial approach*. Having in mind that youth policy and youth work responses to youth transitions are contextual, the strength of community based solution and integrated approaches are also encouraged.

In addition, the Council of Europe's programme of international reviews of national youth policy represents a significant body of work in the analysis of youth employment and the related fields of education and training (Williamson 2002; 2006). These fields are addressed by the Treaty of the Council of Europe and the European Social Charter (1961, 1996), which guarantee fundamental social and economic rights for all citizens. These substantial and politically influential documents represent important reference points that go well beyond the borders of the European Union. Furthermore, key political documents of both European institutions address above mentioned challenges, in particular the European Youth Pact (2005), the Declaration adopted at the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, 'The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: Agenda 2020', in October 2008; the 'Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field 2010-2018' of the European Union; and the 'EU 2020' new economic strategy with the 'Youth on the Move' flagship initiative.

The overall goal of Youth on the Move flagship is 'to unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European Union' (EC, 2010). It promotes strategic initiatives in education and employment of young people, entrepreneurship through mobility programs for young professionals, recognition of non-formal and formal education, and development of new youth policies encouraging apprenticeships, internships and other types of work experience. In order to boost youth employment, the European Commission supports implementation of 4 measures:

- *youth guarantee schemes*: aiming to help ensure that all young people under 25 get a quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed;

- *youth employment Initiative*: referring to provision of EU funding to support young people in regions where youth unemployment rates are above 25%;
- *quality traineeships and apprenticeships*: striving to improve the transition from school to work;
- *labour mobility*: aiming to making it easier for young Europeans to find a job, traineeship or apprenticeship in another EU country⁴.

Overall, the EU is working to reduce youth unemployment and to increase the youth employment rate in line with the wider EU target of achieving a 75% employment rate for the working-age population (20-64 years)⁵.

Recent reports inform that certain level of progress has been registered at the level of implementation of European Youth Strategy in area of Employment and Entrepreneurship. Namely, National Youth Reports (2012) inform us that several Member States have changed their labour laws or applied tax incentives to improve access to the labour market for young people. These are frequently combined with programmes to allow young people to gain work experience, including abroad. Many young people benefit from counselling, offered by education institutions, employment services or youth information services. Many countries offer targeted support, courses, counselling or work placements, to unemployed or vulnerable young people. Traineeships are frequently available as part of formal education and several countries have dual track education systems combining classroom teaching with apprenticeships (EC 2012).

Furthermore, addressing the issue of *discrimination in the labour market*, a number of national governments in the EU have recently developed new employment legislation specifically targeting youth, which deviate from universal labour laws and which demonstrate that the working rights of young people and the rights of young people to a decent and fair wage are not being respected.

The first cycle of Structured Dialogue has been also focused on youth employment. The reports show that young people recommended concrete actions, which fed into a Council Resolution highlighting the need for access to labour market information, non-formal learning, a quality framework for internships, focus on flexicurity and equal access to mobility. The recommendations and the best practices from Member States inspired subsequent Commission initiatives, such as the draft recommendation on non-formal and informal learning and in the wider context of the Youth Opportunities Initiative.

However, recent analysis of Eurofound (2014)⁶ emphasizes that, when designing policies addressing youth economic participation, it is crucial to recognize that young people are a very diverse group with different characteristics and often multiple needs. Policies, while sharing the

⁴ For more information visit: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1036>; European Council Council of the European Union <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/youth-employment/>

⁵ Source: [Factsheet: Addressing youth unemployment in the EU](#).

⁶ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions Eurofound (2014), *Mapping youth transitions in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

same aim, should have different approaches and be tailored to individual needs, with personalised support from personal advisers who seek.

Instead of conclusion

It is important to stress in the end that throughout the financial crisis, the European Commission has been working with Member States to address the economic and social consequences of high and rising unemployment. Some of this work will take time to bear fruit: Europe needs deep structural reform to become more competitive and this cannot be delivered overnight. Essential reforms must therefore be flanked by fast-acting measures to boost growth and to help young people find jobs and acquire essential skills. These measures will boost confidence and show young people that they have a bright future. Still, the topic remains among highest priorities during the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2015), which strives to work with EU governments to *'improve the performance of their labour markets'* by making it easier for young people to find jobs upon leaving school and university, especially by means of the youth guarantee.

Another encouraging initiative reflects in the fact that representatives from governments, industry, academia, NGOs, and other key stakeholders across Europe have joined forces with the European Commission to push for further action to stimulate investment, the acquisition of digital skills and the creation of jobs to kick start Europe's anaemic rate of economic growth. The task of equipping Europe's workforce and citizens with the relevant digital skills, has taken on an even greater urgency now that the creation of a digitally powered single European market has been pushed to the top of Europe's economic agenda. Launched in Riga by the European Commission and the Latvian Presidency of the EU, the *"eSkills for Jobs"* campaign (2015-2016) is designed to address the digital skills gap and will continue to build awareness of the problem in EU Member States. Importantly, striving to unlock the potential of digital technologies in order to fuel growth and jobs, one of the 10 essential principals of the campaign refers to *'Addressing youth unemployment in Europe through digital skills'*. This initiative is based on assumption that youth unemployment will fall if young people are equipped with the digital skills needed for jobs, in turn enhancing the competitiveness of industries across the board, as well as on assumption that job creation can be stimulated through digital technology.

Although all above mentioned initiatives to tackle youth unemployment and social exclusion have been welcome, the evidence shows that much more needs to be done in terms of economic investment in young people and the protection of young people's labour and social rights. Europe needs to commit itself to raising employment levels, create quality employment opportunities among young people, and support measures that promote integration in the labour market and reduce poverty. A secure income must be assured within the framework of professional development. Any other approach risks further alienating young people that are furthest from the labour market, definitively excluding them from employment.

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