

Ensuring Social Inclusion of Young People by Tackling Multi-faceted Vulnerabilities in Employment and Other Areas

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The specific vulnerabilities to social exclusion experienced by young people are complex and originate from a wide range of factors. Distinguishing the causes of social exclusion from the effects is a difficult task. This report sheds light on the intersection between lack of access to employment, or employment in precarious conditions and the discrimination experienced by young people in other areas of life. These two components are at the core of the European Youth Forum's (YFJ's) work on social affairs and equality, in which crosscutting perspectives have been developed through policy development and research, advocacy, and the lobbying of institutional stakeholders.

Introduction

Poverty and social exclusion are two intertwined phenomena that often manifest together. Exclusion and precariousness in the field of employment not only lead to lack of financial means, but also to multiple forms of exclusion in other areas of life. In this sense, social exclusion experienced by young people encompasses a wide range of disadvantageous situations and violations of fundamental rights such as ill health; poor access to healthcare services; lack of affordable and decent housing, education, goods and services; a sense of alienation from society; lack of opportunities to participate in public life; and stigmatisation.

The cycle of poverty is indeed a vicious one, both from inter-generational and inter-sectorial perspectives; young people experiencing poverty are not likely to exit poverty in adulthood (inter-generational) and are likely to simultaneously experience violations of fundamental rights in many areas of life (inter-sectorial).

Although some specific groups of young people are likely to be more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, a general vulnerability linked to age should be acknowledged and effective measures taken. Children represent a

vulnerable group, but young adults are also particularly exposed. According to statistics, 20% of young people (aged 16–24) are currently living at risk of poverty in the European Union. Phenomena not directly relating to income poverty – such as early school leaving, discrimination and harassment at school, and lack of youth friendly healthcare services – have had a definite impact on the social exclusion of young people. For example, early school leavers are more likely to experience violence, discrimination and ill health (YFJ 2008; Eurostat 2010). Discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people at school has an extremely negative impact on their health and fundamental right to education (Takacs 2006). Discrimination against young migrants and the challenges they face in the fields of education and employment are also alarming. Indeed, young migrants' educational performance is lower than that of their native peers (OECD-PISA 2006) and the employment rate of migrants averages 3.3% lower than the general population (Eurostat 2010).

Although legal protection against discrimination exists to some extent, gaps in European and national laws pose a major challenge to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion. Although young Europeans are protected against discrimination in the field of employment (Council of the European Union 2000), they can be discriminated against in the field of education. They can also be discriminated against on the grounds of age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and disability in any field but employment and occupation (YFJ 2009). This is at odds with other European policies, including the Education and Training Work Programme 2010 (European Commission 2010), which included the 85% benchmark to be attained in the field of secondary education before 2010. This benchmark was not achieved and secondary education attainment is currently at only 78.5% (Eurostat UOE and LFS 2009). While Article 19 of the Lisbon Treaty is a key provision for combating discrimination, it covers only six grounds of discrimination. Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU is much broader covering discrimination based on birth, property and political opinions; it prohibits:

Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social

origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation.

Similarly, the Council of Europe's Revised European Social Charter (ESC) foresees a more inclusive list of protected grounds, such as social origin, birth and national extraction. Article E of the Revised Social Charter reads:

The enjoyment of the rights set forth in this Charter shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national extraction or social origin, health, association with a national minority, birth or other status. (Council of the European Union 1997)

The rights set forth in the ESC should also be ensured for third-country nationals legally residing in one of the Council of Europe Member States.

Youth poverty and the lifecycle

Due to the changes occurring within European societies, young people are becoming more and more at risk of poverty. While at the beginning of last century, young people were identified as the group least vulnerable to poverty (Rowntree 1901), in 2007, 20% of young Europeans aged 16 to 24 were at risk of poverty, compared to 17% of the general population (Eurostat 2010, p 48). Youth are no longer at such an economically untroubled stage of the lifecycle as they once were. Research on youth poverty very precisely captures the core of the changed reality:

With increasing levels of participation in higher education, young people are spending longer dependent on the state or their families for financial support, and without earned incomes of their own. Additionally, changes to youth labour markets over recent decades mean that when young people do enter the labour market, they may spend considerable periods without a job, or in low-waged or insecure employment. (Aassve et al. 2005, p 1)

This situation is confirmed by figures relating to average income; in 2007, close to 10% of young

¹ The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is an independent, democratic, youth-led platform, representing 98 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations across Europe. The YFJ works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives, by representing them and advocating for their needs and interests and those of their organisations towards the European Institutions, the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

European households (the oldest member of which is aged under 30) were unable to afford a meal with meat or fish every second day or to buy a computer, with one in six also being unable to afford a car. In addition, one-third could not afford one week's holiday away from home per year (European Commission 2009b, p 45).

It is important to note that at risk of poverty rates tend to be higher in countries where young people actually can afford to start an independent adult life; while those who still live in their parents' households and share their income, are less likely to be recorded as poor. When asked why they live longer with their parents, 44% of young respondents indicated that they cannot afford to move out, and 28% mentioned lack of affordable housing (European Commission 2009b, p 30).

Vulnerability and exclusion in the labour market

Nowadays, employment is often perceived as the answer to poverty; however, figures relating to 'in work poverty' portray a different reality and shed light on the importance of decent working conditions as well as access to the labour market to prevent poverty.

Inclusion in the labour market is key to ensuring social inclusion. Indeed, working is not only a way of securing adequate financial means, it also allows us to keep in touch with society. Working is a meaningful way to fulfil one's ambitions, realise personal development, learn new skills and qualifications, and keep up to date.

Paradoxically, the current young generation, while being the best-educated generation ever, familiar with new technologies, and more mobile and open to new opportunities, faces a higher degree of vulnerability in the labour market. Every sixth young European (15–24) is unemployed, 40% of those working are on temporary contracts and the level of in work poverty among young people is 10% (European Commission 2009b).

The young are the segment of European population that works most in low-quality jobs which require low qualifications and are poorly paid. Many young people are denied access to the rights of social citizenship which the European social model has up to now guaranteed its workers. These factors help to delay access to an adult life based on economic independence from families of origin and on the possibility of making responsible choices connected to creating a family and parenthood. (European Commission 2008c)

Discrimination and exclusion in other areas of life

As previously mentioned, the exclusion of young people from the labour market and income poverty are linked with vulnerabilities experienced in other areas of life. In particular, although achievements in the field of education could potentially lead to inclusion in the labour market, for many young people this relation is not a causal one as they can find themselves unemployed or at risk of poverty even though they have successfully completed tertiary education.²

Many factors, including socioeconomic ones, hamper young people from completing their education, putting them at risk of exclusion, particularly considering the positive role played by education in inclusion in the labour market and in the fight against income poverty. Worryingly enough, the percentage of early school leavers in the EU27 in 2008 was 14.9%³ (Eurostat 2010).

Research has shown that students coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to leave school earlier than their peers (Simon 2003). Socioeconomic disadvantages include low income household, parents with a low level of education, numerous families or single parent families. These factors might also be combined with discrimination on other grounds such as ethnic origin, religion or migrant status.

It is striking to observe the vicious cycle of disadvantaged socioeconomic background, migrant status, difficulties in the field of education and vulnerabilities in the labour market experienced by migrant youth and by young people from a migrant background. Young migrants are more likely to leave school earlier than their native peers (European Commission 2008b), perform poorly at school and experience extremely high levels of unemployment (OECD-PISA 2006). In Belgium, the unemployment rate among young second-generation migrants is four times the unemployment rate among native Belgians. Moreover, the length of unemployment is 30%

² Obtaining good qualifications is, however, helpful for job seekers, as unemployment rates tend to decrease the higher the level of education attained. This was a characteristic noted in almost every Member State in 2009, as the average unemployment rate in the EU27 for those having attained at most a lower secondary education was 12.8%, much higher than the rate of unemployment (4.5%) for those who had a tertiary education (see Eurostat < http://eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics >).

³ Indicators defined as the percentage of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most lower secondary education and who are not in further education or training.

longer among young Belgians with a migrant background than native Belgians (Timmerman et al. 2003). It is interesting to note that both in France and Belgium, although some inter-generational mobility takes place in the field of education, the positive patterns are not reflected in the field of employment. Multiple discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin, migrant status, age and religion could be reasons behind this, as surveys show a high prevalence of discrimination against migrants in employment and education (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009).

Structural flaws in education systems certainly lead to exclusion and vulnerability among young people. For instance, schools that fail to embrace the positive aspects of diversity by not providing teachers with appropriate training on equality and non-discrimination, and that refuse to develop curricula to include human rights education to avoid the reproduction of stereotypes, play a role in reinforcing the cycle of social exclusion. Research shows that schools that give value to multiple identities and, more specifically, that positively impact on the acculturation of young migrants and young people with migrant backgrounds, are key to ensuring better achievement by these students (Nekby et al. 2009).

Living at risk of poverty, lack of financial means, social exclusion and discrimination also have negative consequences on the fundamental rights of young people to the attainment of the highest standard of health. Although this relation is a complex one, young people from more affluent families are more likely to report better health outcomes than their peers from less affluent backgrounds. In particular, obesity and being overweight are clearly associated with low family affluence (WHO 2006, Section 2: Health Outcomes).

Mental ill health experienced by young people is often associated with racism, sexism and discrimination. Research undertaken in England found that more than 40% of respondents identified discrimination, racism and sexism as issues for which they would need counselling (Youth Access 2000). Bullying at school, a form of discrimination according to European standards, often leads to anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (McNamee 2006; Baldry 2004; Ybarra 2004; Smokowski and Kopasz 2005; Kim et al. 2005). Although it is difficult to assess the incidences of bullying, some studies show that it is a widespread phenomenon, occurring in different countries and across different socioeconomic strata. According to a cross-national study carried out in 2001 on 10 to 14 year-old pupils, 12.2% of respon-

dents in England, 13.9% in the Netherlands and 10% in Norway reported having been bullied more than just once or twice in the previous six months. In some countries, a positive association has been identified between victimisation and low family affluence, especially for young females (WHO 2006, p 159).

Sexual and reproductive health and rights is another area where young people are particularly vulnerable and where discrimination on different grounds could expose them to serious risks of ill health. According to statistics, young people tend to have poorer access to reliable information on sexually transmitted diseases than adults (Panchaud et al. 2000).

Lack of, or poor, sexual education at school, unavailable or inaccessible youth-friendly family-planning services and family background significantly contributes to this scenario. For example, research in the Netherlands, involving the largest ethnic minorities (Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese) showed that partnership choices and sexuality for these groups significantly differ from their peers of Dutch origin. Indeed, family is often heavily involved in marriage choices, with forced and arranged marriages taking place. The high level of stress generated by these interferences can have severe consequences: suicide attempts are widely reported among girls of Turkish and Surinamese origin. Young men of Surinamese and Turkish origin are more likely to commit suicide than their peers of Dutch origin (IPPF 2005). The results of an Internet survey undertaken in 2005 showed that young people from ethnic minorities in the Netherlands appeared to know less about sexual risks and contraception than young people of Dutch origin (IPPF 2005).

Conclusion and recommendations

Young people in Europe have multi-faceted vulnerabilities in different areas of life, which expose them to the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Some vulnerabilities are linked to the specificities experienced by certain groups of young people, in particular relating to socio-economic and family background, migrant background, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, religion and disability. Others are intrinsically linked to the peculiar transitional phase of life young people are going through: transition from childhood to adulthood, from education to the labour market, from living with their family to running a household on their own.

Tackling poverty and social exclusion stemming from these factors requires a strong political commitment on different levels (local, national and European), as well as the effective coordination of policies in the areas of equality, non-

discrimination, employment, social inclusion, migration and youth. Some of the major issues to be tackled by these policies include:

- 1. Ensuring better access to education:** Education should be made more accessible and affordable to ensure the full autonomy of young people; this can be done by making scholarships and other types of financial support available as students develop, especially for secondary and tertiary education. This way, children can progressively gain independence from parental means. Financial support should cover additional costs such as the cost of educational materials, costs related to practical engagements as part of a curriculum, and travel expenses for people from rural areas, as well as the provision of accessible housing. Financial incentives for staying in education could also be provided to young people, or their families, in the case of minors.
- 2. Developing inclusive educational systems:** School curricula should be revised to include human rights education and to combat stereotypes and prejudices. Training on equality, diversity and non-discrimination should be provided to teachers. Democratic school management should be promoted in cooperation with students' unions. Effective policies combating discrimination and bullying at school should be put in place, including counselling services for victims.
- 3. Providing protection against discrimination in all areas of life:** Despite Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (Council of the European Union 2000), discrimination based on age still manifests itself. Young people should have equal access to social protection systems, and minimum wage and benefits should not be dependent on age.⁴ Towards this, key provisions in the Revised European Social Charter relate to the right to social security and decent working conditions including fair remuneration; these should be fully implemented.⁵

Discrimination on the basis of age, and the intersection between age and other forms of discrimination, have extremely negative

⁴ Recent ECJ case-law on discrimination on the ground of young age in the field of employment and occupation include: case C-229/08 *Colin Wolf v. Stadt Frankfurt Am Main*, case C-88/08 *David Hütter v. Technische Universität Graz*, case C-555/07 *Seda Küçükdeveci v. Swedex GmbH & Co. KG*.

⁵ Article 1 – the right to work; Article 2 – the right to just conditions of work; Article 4 – the right to fair remuneration; Article 12 – the right to social security; Article 13 – the right to social and medical assistance; Article 14 – the right to benefit from social welfare services

consequences on the lives of young people. Protection against all forms of discrimination, including multiple discrimination, should be provided at both the European and national levels in all areas of life including education, social security, social advantages, health, and access to good and services. Accordingly, the proposal for a new EU anti-discrimination Directive should be adopted by the Council of the European Union without delay (European Commission 2008a, European Parliament 2009).

- 4. Ensuring decent jobs and internships:** Young people are by far the most flexible group on the labour market, but the security balance next to it is clearly lagging behind. This dangerous trend of precariousness must be reversed by adapting and modernising social security system to ensure that young people have a stable and autonomous life, even when they are on short-term contracts. There is also a need for specialised youth-targeted income support for situations when the labour market fails and young people, due to their little or nonexistent labour market experience, are not entitled to the standard support.

Internships and apprenticeships have become a reality for many young people, through which they complement their formal education and make the transition from education to work. In many cases, young people enter precarious and underpaid work that provides them with no or little learning. It is vital that the learning dimension of internships is ensured and that internships do not replace paid work. To guarantee this, the European Youth Forum is campaigning for EU wide quality standards for internships, such as length, nature of tasks, remuneration and social guarantees.

- 5. Providing ad hoc labour market support measures:** Measures should be put in place that specifically target young people and help to speed up the school-to-work transitional, make it quality driven and ensure that it leads to longer lasting work placements. No one can afford to waste the potential of graduates by keeping them away from the labour market. Special measures, early intervention and back-to-work policies have to be in place to address the current unprecedented high levels of youth unemployment and to prevent further regression in this area. The introduction of such measures has to be coupled with relevant incentives for both private and public employers, and career guidance and training opportunities for young people. The European Social Fund should be used to support such initiatives. ■

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