

# SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

**Howard Williamson**

Substantive issues, methodological  
lessons, support measures  
and youth policy standards:  
a reflection on the "third seven"  
Council of Europe  
international reviews  
of national youth policy

**VOLUME III**



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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# Executive summary

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There's a crack in everything,  
that's how the light gets in.  
*(Leonard Cohen 1934-2016)*

**T**he Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy have been running for over 20 years. Since 1997, when the first international review took place (of national youth policy in Finland), 21 countries have been reviewed. These reviews involved a steep learning curve in relation both to the process of conducting them and to the content of “youth policy”. Following the first seven international reviews, a synthesis report was produced that endeavoured to construct, from the material available, a framework for assisting the understanding of “youth policy” (Williamson 2002). This was in keeping with the third of the three core objectives of the international reviews of national youth policy:

- ▶ to provide constructively critical feedback on a country's youth policy through the application of “a stranger's eye”;
- ▶ to disseminate “best practice” from a country's youth policy to the other member states of the Council of Europe;
- ▶ to develop a framework for thinking more creatively and purposefully about “youth policy” throughout Europe.

A similar “synthesis” exercise took place after a further seven international reviews, reflecting both on the unfolding and evolving process of carrying out the reviews and on new themes and issues for “youth policy” that had not emerged or been apparent within the initial framework (Williamson 2008). This inevitably produced a somewhat unwieldy range and depth of issues that, in turn, demanded adaptation of the process of conducting the reviews.

This book is therefore the third “synthesis report”, though it does not focus exclusively on the last seven international reviews. It also draws together some of the conclusions and challenges that have emerged over the two decades since the international reviews commenced, and considers some lessons for the future, not least alternative models of engagement in the youth field between the Council of Europe and its member states and whether or not there is a case for strengthening a “reviewing” contribution and capability through the use of more robust indicators and standards that have been agreed on to determine the efficacy of “youth policy” within the member states.

The social, political, cultural and economic situation in Europe has changed quite dramatically over the past 20 years, especially for young people. The international reviews of national youth policy have taken place at a time of the “enlargement” of both the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU). It has also been a time of economic crisis and political diversification, at both ends of the political spectrum, to which young people have responded very differently, and whose needs have also been interpreted in very different ways. “Youth policy” has also evolved in different ways, and indeed continues to evolve (new politicians responsible for youth are invariably keen to put their stamp on their tenure by backing new initiatives). In contrast, the international reviews of national youth policy that have taken place are inevitably cast in stone, in the sense that they are bound to a particular time. Nonetheless, they still produce many ideas, messages, tensions and issues that transcend the time at which they emerged and continue to have resonance and relevance today. It is these that are highlighted in this text.

The book has five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the last seven international reviews of national youth policy – of Latvia, Moldova, Albania, Belgium, Ukraine, Greece and Serbia. This overview is not, it must be emphasised, a regurgitation of the executive summaries of those respective international reports. Each of those international reports was revisited in order to draw out those issues that have greatest purchase and pertinence for international consideration and discussion, even though they have been taken from specific national contexts.

Chapter 2 takes a different stance, drawing on issues that spanned more than one of these seven international reviews but which had little prominence in previous synthesis reports. In that respect, they add even more flesh to the bones of the idea of “youth policy” – where it comes from, how it is made and where it is executed. Some issues, such as definitions of “youth” and the role of national youth councils, are far from new; here they are raised again, because the lessons from these last seven countries further elaborate on, reinforce or provide new insights into them.

Chapter 3 considers the process of conducting the international reviews of national youth policy over the past 20 years – from the international review of youth policy in Finland that took little over six months to the international review of youth policy in Serbia that took around two years. The great strengths attached to many innovations to the process (e.g. a preliminary visit to determine priorities and negotiate a suitable programme, extra working days for the international review team, a national hearing, greater scrutiny of the text prior to publication) have also been weaknesses in the sense of considerably extending the duration of an international review.

This has led to deliberation within the Council of Europe Youth Department on alternative models of engagement with member states. These are considered, relatively briefly, in Chapter 4. All have their “trade-offs”, of course, in the sense that, for example, a narrower focus risks losing a more holistic perspective. There is little doubt, however, that a more flexible menu of options should be developed and made available. The international reviews of national youth policy offer a template, or launch pad, from which this can take place.

Chapter 5 addresses the controversial and often contentious subject of indicators and standards for youth policy. It seeks to set the scene and promote the case for further debate, without advancing any conclusive answers. It makes the important point that this is not a new debate; indeed, it has been a slow burner, with some early work conducted at the turn of the millennium. The challenge, throughout and moving forward, lies in identifying meaningful and manageable indicators, though even the term “indicators” is often challenged and other terms, such as “benchmarks” or “standards”, are favoured. Where some consensus would appear to exist is in the need to distil a relatively small suite of indicators for perusal and inquisition, with perhaps some essential components and other more elective (optional) elements. Further debate needs to be developed sensitively: despite advocacy from some quarters that such a step change in the Youth Department’s relations with member states is imperative (for a range of reasons), there is also suspicion and the prospect of resistance that will need to be handled with care.

The Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy have, over 20 years, produced a significant body of knowledge and a respected, innovative methodology. They have significantly enhanced understanding and the development of “youth policy”. This synthesis of the last seven international reviews, coupled with more of an overview of the learning that has accrued from all 21 international reviews, will hopefully provide some useful lessons for the future.





# Introduction

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It was over 20 years ago (1995) that the Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy were envisioned and it has been 20 years since the first review was conducted. The idea was to replicate the practice of the Council of Europe reviews of national cultural policies but, while “cultural policy” was by then broadly understood, “youth policy” – beyond some rather vague conceptualisations and rhetorical assertions – was not. The international reviews of national youth policy were a venture, and adventure, into the unknown.

Indeed, in the opening to the first international youth policy review, of Finland, there is a quotation from a book of poems penned by the then Minister for Culture (with responsibility for youth) Claus Andersen. It is worth reproducing here:

There is a road no one has taken before you  
Maybe it's yours  
If you find it, it will be  
It doesn't exist but comes into being when you walk it  
When you turn around, it's gone  
No one knows how you got here, least of all yourself

*(What became words 1996 cited in Fremerey 1999: 11)*

There were no explicit terms of reference for that first international review of a national youth policy. Finland had produced a national report and arranged a first set of visits for the international review team. After that, the team was on its own, working out what to consider and how to react. It probably did this quite effectively, but produced no legacy for the second review, of the Netherlands, in 1998. Each of the first few youth policy reviews, as a result, took its own course. There was little preparatory work, except for the expectation that the host country would produce a national report<sup>1</sup> on the state of its youth policy, and the final (international) report was shaped primarily by the thinking and priorities of the rapporteur, with some consultation and contribution from other members of the international review team, rather than any other influences.

For this reason, five years after the series of international reviews had been set in motion and built up an initial body of knowledge, albeit ad hoc and inconsistent, a report was commissioned that sought to draw out the key messages and themes from the first seven “international youth policy reviews” (Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Romania, Estonia and Luxembourg), as they came to be called, and to propose a framework that might guide the enquiries and deliberations of future reviews. This analysis was duly completed in 2002 (Williamson 2002).

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1. These were commissioned and prepared in very different ways, with different types of contributors and the use of a wide variety of source material. Despite their diversity, they usually provided some baseline information, knowledge and understanding to help members of the international review team establish some orientation towards the country in question.

A similar exercise was commissioned six years later after seven more reviews (Lithuania, Norway, Malta, Cyprus, Slovakia, Armenia and Hungary). Not only did this add substantively to the framework of issues that required attention in “youth policy” reflections, it also paid attention to the process of conducting an international youth policy review: considering staging posts such as a preliminary visit prior to the two standard visits by an international review team, and a national hearing prior to the concluding international hearing before the Joint Council of the statutory bodies of the Youth Directorate (now Youth Department) of the Council of Europe – the European Steering Group on Youth (the CDEJ), comprising senior civil servants, and the Advisory Council on Youth, comprising representatives of youth organisations.

This publication is therefore the third “synthesis” review. It considers the lessons learned from the next seven countries to be reviewed (Latvia, Moldova, Albania, Belgium, Ukraine, Greece and Serbia) and, like the second synthesis review, it also pays attention both to content and to process. Though it adds substantively to our understanding of the issues confronted in the shaping and making of youth policy, and reflects critically on the methodologies that were invoked in conducting the international reviews of national youth policy, it also looks to the future in terms of other models of engagement between the Council of Europe and its member states, and discusses the merits (and drawbacks) of a framework of indicators and standards for youth policy in the context of some expectation that there should be more robust monitoring procedures for youth policy development and implementation in the member states.

Though substantively covering only one third of the international reviews that have been conducted, chronologically this synthesis report covers the past 10 years – half of the period during which the reviews have, to date, taken place.

The first international review of national youth policy took place when the European Union had just 15 members, though the Council of Europe had 40 members. However, of those 40 member states of the Council of Europe (it now has 47), over a quarter had only recently joined: five in 1995 and five others in 1993. Andorra joined the Council of Europe in 1994. Two other countries, the Russian Federation and Croatia, became members in 1996, just ahead of the international review of national youth policy in Finland (March to September 1997). It is worth noting, therefore, that there were fewer members of the Council of Europe in the early 1990s than there are now member states of the EU, the membership of which expanded from 15 to 25 in 2004, then to 27 with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, and to 28, with Croatia, in 2013. It will revert to 27 when the UK leaves the Union in 2019, following its referendum on EU membership in June 2016.

The evolution of the Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy has therefore taken place concurrently with this dramatic enlargement of both the EU and the Council of Europe. Though this is not the place to debate those relationships in detail, it is useful to reflect on the place of youth policy within those developments. It was perhaps not coincidental that one of the great spurs to stimulating political attention to youth policy took place around the time of the 2001 EU White Paper on Youth in those Council of Europe member states that were seeking

accession to the EU, such as Slovenia, Hungary, Latvia and Cyprus. Similarly, it is arguably not just coincidence that the international youth policy review of Armenia was requested shortly after Armenia joined the Council of Europe.

The swift enlargement of “Europe” (whether defined as the 28 member states of the EU or the 47 member states of the Council of Europe) at the turn of the millennium therefore also acted as a catalyst for youth policy momentum, in part as countries sought to learn from and emulate lessons from other “unfamiliar” countries and in part to invest positively in young people’s potential to pre-empt the “brain drain” that was anticipated from some countries at least.

This promise for Europe’s young people, linked with the anticipated benefits of greater European integration, stalled suddenly, however, with the financial crisis of 2008. Young people have been hit disproportionately hard by the crisis, in some countries in particular, with levels of youth unemployment that could hardly be foreseen. On the wider political stage, the crisis heralded the growth both of “radical” parties and social action on the left and “reactionary” parties and social retrenchment on the right, with fault lines appearing throughout Europe between and within countries. Economic, cultural and religious divisions have been exacerbated. Domestic and European challenges have, further, been added to by the challenges of migration arising from the social and political upheavals in Africa and the Middle East. Globalisation, which once held hope for a greater proportion of the next generation, now appeared to be reinforcing inequality both between and within generations. The social exclusion of growing numbers of young people, through heightened levels of unemployment, the pressures of the housing market and delays in family formation – despite dramatically improved educational achievement and civic engagement and participation – has led to significant political concern<sup>2</sup> and different reactions among young people (Williamson 2013). While the Council of Europe and its youth partnership with the European Commission have retained a broad overview of the issues, with laudable attention to, for example, the barriers to social inclusion (Markovic, Garcia Lopez and Dzigurski 2015) or combating the rise of hate speech in Europe, others have narrowed their youth policy focus to the most pressing matters, such as the re-engagement of young people not in education, employment or training (young people so often, dreadfully, depicted just as “NEET”) and addressing violent extremism and radicalisation. Yet it is clear that focus needs to be spread across a wider canvas of youth policy, even if some issues will inevitably command attention at particular moments. The European Commission’s Youth Guarantee,<sup>3</sup> for example, is an important policy initiative but it should not attract exclusive attention and divert consideration of

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2. In 2012, for example, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe debated “the young generation sacrificed”, considering the social, economic and political consequences for young people of the financial crisis, available at <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=18918&lang=EN>, accessed 17 April 2017.

3. The EU Youth Guarantee, established in 2013 as part of the Youth Employment Initiative, promises young people a guaranteed place in education, training or employment within four months of leaving education or becoming unemployed, see [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/youth-employment/youth-guarantee](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/youth-employment/youth-guarantee), accessed 17 April 2017.

wider measures in the youth policy domains of education, vocational training and employment.

It is plausible to suggest that in the rather “heady” days for youth policy in the mid to late 1990s – the days of, *inter alia*, the Council of Europe Youth Ministers’ first statement on youth policy (at its fifth meeting in Bucharest, 1998) and the preparation of the European Commission’s White Paper on Youth, as well as a significant number of Council of Europe member states seeking accession to the EU – there was a real groundswell of political interest and commitment to establish policy measures that fell broadly under the umbrella of “youth policy”. There were arguments about what should be “in” and what should be “out” (family policy? youth justice policy?) but, as the first synthesis report illustrated (Williamson 2002), there was a common framework around which youth policy development in many countries throughout Europe was taking shape. Analysis of the first seven international reviews of national youth policy (both the national and international reports) suggested that challenges and developments could be positioned within a framework that was broadly the same, even if the scale of those challenges, the resources available and the political will were very different, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: The “youth policy” framework that emerged from a synthesis of the first seven international reviews of national youth policy**

Conceptualisations – of “youth” and “youth policy”
Legislation and budgets – the “enabling” context
Structures for delivery – regional/local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
Policy domains – education, training and employment, health, housing, crime
Cross-cutting issues – participation, information, social inclusion, equal opportunities
Foundations for development – training, research, good practice dissemination
Mechanisms for review and evaluation

Source: Williamson (2002)

There was never any intention to produce a blueprint for “youth policy” from the international youth policy reviews. Rather, the idea was to draw on the diverse understandings and initiatives being used in different contexts to inform a European debate on what might constitute youth policy. Indeed, from the very start, the objectives of the international youth policy reviews were to:

- ▶ provide an constructive external critique of (and support for) “youth policy” within the country under review;
- ▶ provide wider Europe with knowledge about “youth policy” in that country;
- ▶ use the lessons from each successive country reviewed to build a framework of understanding of what “youth policy” might look like.

During the early 2000s, considerable reference to and cross-fertilisation of debate took place on the “youth policy” question, to which the findings of the Council of Europe international youth policy reviews made a significant contribution. Across the central youth policy domains of formal and non-formal education, vocational training, labour market initiatives, health, housing and (sometimes) criminal justice, there was a sharing of experience and practice that produced support for measures such as youth work, personal and social education, youth-friendly clinics, youth information and, critically, platforms for youth participation and involvement in decision making. Some of these were well-established policy initiatives; others were completely innovative.

At the end of the “second seven” Council of Europe international youth policy reviews, one could say with some confidence that thinking around “youth policy” was reaching some level of maturity, with countries considerably clearer about its purpose and processes, and international youth policy reviews clear about their role and contribution. The financial crisis, together with what has been termed the “tyranny of policy momentum” (Hyman 2008), has changed much of that.

Over the past seven years, “youth policy” has been on the back foot, certainly in some parts of Europe. It has been vulnerable to cuts in public services and subjected to questioning once again about its merits and legitimacy. If “youth” needs a dedicated policy framework, the argument goes, so do other age groups, including the elderly – who deserve more respect, having earned their “rights”, and who, anyway, are more likely to vote! Young people and their advocates, of course, argue differently: it is the young who have disproportionately suffered from the effects of austerity, though they bear the least blame for the “crisis”, and so there needs to be a redoubling of effort to ensure they have opportunities for greater support, security, autonomy and participation. The arguments will ebb and flow. What is not in doubt is that the stability of any youth policy, in almost any corner of Europe, is constantly under threat. New governments, even new ministers, are eager to do something new and, increasingly, they sweep out not only tried and tested practice but also recent practice that has been tried but not yet tested. They often experiment with new measures that have no provenance or evidence base simply because they capture the political imagination or comply with the ideology of the ruling party.

This makes things very difficult for procedures such as the Council of Europe international youth policy reviews. These take time – usually around 18 months, but sometimes up to two years, from the initial preliminary visit to the approval and publication of the final report. There is also meant to be, according to the overall process agreed between the country requesting a review and the Council of Europe, a follow-up after around two years,<sup>4</sup> through which consideration is given to the extent to which a country took into account the thinking and recommendations of the youth policy review.

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4. These have hardly ever been activated, certainly not formally, although sometimes there have been more informal reflections on the contribution made by the international youth policy review and subsequent youth policy development in the country on the basis of its recommendations.

There have been other models of engagement:

- ▶ youth policy advisory missions (from 2003);
- ▶ a proposed but unexecuted youth policy strategic support development mission;
- ▶ expert responses to draft youth policy and strategy documentation.

Moreover, there is no doubt now that there should be other “bespoke” responses, built on both demand and a deal, though it is not always clear how these should be constructed. The international reviews of national youth policy – now a respected methodological framework emulated by others – were originally proposed by governmental representatives of the first country to be reviewed. Now is the time for a more collective and collaborative debate about other models for moving forward in the future.

First, however, it is necessary to look at the most recent seven countries to have been reviewed, covering the internal material supplied and the international conclusions, and to connect this information to the procedures and frameworks developed over the previous decade. Readers might ask why these seven countries have been selected. This is a good question, but the simple answer is because they requested a review. One international review team member who was not particularly familiar with the process or its history once asked, “Does the Council of Europe only review small eastern European countries?” He had a point, given that quite a number of countries reviewed were from that geographical location and had populations of around three million (though, demographically, some six out of 21 is quite a low proportion, given that over half of the countries of Europe have populations of three million or less). Where, others asked, were France, Germany or the UK? Again, these are reasonable questions, to which the only safe answer is that they have not asked for a review. Equally, one can in fact point to considerable diversity in the countries reviewed, in terms of geographical position, demographic profile, and political and cultural history. Whether or not that is convincing is actually irrelevant; we are working with the material we have.

The basis for this analysis is somewhat different from the two that have preceded it primarily because unlike in previous volumes, many countries in this most recent cluster did not produce a formal national youth policy report. This was often because they neither had the professional and economic resources nor the knowledge base to do so. Instead, and sometimes as a rather poor substitute, they offered existing material: collections of reports, a current national youth strategy or something else. This has meant that, rather than drawing clearly and comfortably on 14 documents (seven national reports and seven international reports), as the two previous “synthesis reviews” were able to, an exploration of the lessons from the most recent seven international youth policy reviews has had to probe a rather more diverse set of material, at least from the national perspectives. The seven reports produced by the international review teams do, however, continue to constitute the bedrock of this analysis.

It is important to emphasise from the outset, however, that this synthesis review intends neither to attack nor to applaud the “youth policy” of particular countries. Rather, it is to make use of the state of their youth policies at the time of these reviews in order to consider, more broadly, the issues at play and at stake in the