ABOUT TIME!
A reference manual for youth policy from a European perspective

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Youth Partnership

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Notes on contributors

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Max Fras is a researcher and an international development consultant. He holds a PhD in social sciences and two MAs in religious studies and international relations. Max has over 15 years of experience as researcher, trainer, evaluator and consultant in academia (University College London and London School of Economics) and in international organisations such as the EU, the Council of Europe, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the British Council, in the fields of civil society, youth, education, culture and human rights. Max is a member of the Council of Europe Youth Department Trainers Pool and the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership's Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR).

Zara Lavchyan is an educator, educational adviser, programme developer and expert in the field of youth policy and youth work. Zara is a member of the Council of Europe Youth Department Trainers Pool. For the past 15 years she has been actively involved in supporting the development of youth policy, youth work, non-formal education and community development in Armenia, post-Soviet countries and wider Europe. She is also the author of a number of educational activities, games, manuals and handbooks, online courses for educators on the themes of participation, youth policy, youth work and projects, intercultural dialogue, transversal skills, social entrepreneurship and community development.

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Introduction

This reference manual for youth policy draws significantly on Finn Denstad's (2009) original work in the same area but also revises and develops it substantially. The manual published in 2009 derived from some particular models of youth policy development that seemingly had a sequential, systematic and linear character. In the light of a further 10 years' experience and knowledge of and inquiry into youth policy formulation, development and implementation at national level within the member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe, a more cyclical perspective is now proposed, within which youth policy making takes on a more dynamic character. On the one hand, it is informed and enabled by political championship, research and evaluation knowledge, professional debate and practice experience; on the other hand, it can also be obstructed by political change, an absence of timely and relevant knowledge transfer, professional infighting and practice inertia.

The reference manual explores youth policy making through the knowledge-gathering work conducted at European level in recent years, looking at theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the landscape of national and regional youth policy initiatives across Europe and the governance and support mechanisms that have been developed at European level by the Council of Europe and the European Union. While 10 years ago, policy makers had to be convinced of the need to ensure young people's participation in policy making, today the important principle of participation is understood and integrated, to various degrees, in policy making. Similarly, it is widely understood that some forms of evidence gathering and evaluation of past initiatives have to be carried out when planning new policy initiatives. Today, youth policy makers in Europe can resort to large knowledge and information databases on youth policy such as the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) or the EU Youth Wiki platform. A quick scan of these databases shows that the youth policy landscape is complex and diverse, but is driven by standards commonly debated and agreed by stakeholders in European forums.

So here we are, a decade after the first published manual, with a much richer understanding of youth policy set-ups, principles, governance, conceptual approaches, implementation and funding systems. Several themes have also emerged that have driven a European understanding and approach to youth policy making, and many instruments, tools and implementation systems have been rolled out at national and local level for the benefit of young people.

It is hoped that this new edition of the youth policy manual will energise those within the youth sector – those already within the policy arena, those in research, and those in practice, and of course the young people and their organisations involved in such initiatives – to recognise the contribution they can make to positive and purposeful youth policy making through better understanding, active engagement and grounded action. This reference manual aims to promote

reflection, dialogue and implementation and to shape a more realistic view of the cyclical nature of youth policy making.

Youth policy, as a concept, can range from being very narrowly to very broadly constructed. This manual begins with this broad idea of positioning youth policy in the general context of public policy. Thematically it focuses very specifically on those areas of youth policy that have been formulated, developed and driven at the level of European consensus: participation, information, volunteering, social inclusion, access to rights, youth work, mobility and digitalisation. These are, of course, also themes and issues that should lie at the heart of youth policy at every level of policy development and implementation; after all, many of them thread through most aspects of youth policy and practice. But the manual does not consider in any detail those specific aspects of youth policy that remain largely the prerogative of national or local public authorities – for example, formal education, vocational training and employment, health, housing, criminal justice, social protection and financial and economic independence. There may well be a European-level purview of these policy domains that is of relevance to the youth sector where they touch the lives of young people, but they have not been central to the deliberations of the youth sector at European level.

The place and purpose of the youth policy manual

The EU–Council of Europe youth partnership has already developed a range of other documents and resources to do with youth policy since the publication of the first youth policy manual. These include the following.

Youth policy essentials – a brief presentation of the key features of youth policy making (EU–Council of Europe youth partnership 2019).

Insights into youth policy governance – a user-friendly presentation of the diversity of national governance systems for youth policy and how they ensure youth participation (EU–Council of Europe youth partnership 2018a).

Massive open online course (MOOC): Essentials of youth policy – a course about the key features and processes of youth policy making and European resources to support them (available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/online-course-on-youth-policy).

Youth policy evaluation review (Lonean et al. 2020) and *Insights into youth policy evaluation* – a comparative study on how evaluation is applied in youth policy across Europe.

Country information on youth policy – a database of youth policy overviews at national levels, available in the EKCYP.

This revised youth policy manual sits, therefore, between providing a description of youth policy and sharpening an understanding of it. It is about what actors in the youth field need to do to optimise their contribution to youth policy making and

to sustain a momentum for youth policy in their countries. It is a practical guide to the challenges that are likely to emerge, the resources that are available, and the actions that are needed. Building on some essential conceptual thinking, it draws on a variety of sources and illustrations that have become available since the first youth policy manual was published.

This manual is aimed at all those within the fabled triangle or pyramid that constitutes the youth sector – those already working in youth policy at all levels, those involved in youth research, and practitioners in the youth field as well as young people and their organisations. Of course, those with long experience in the sector are likely to be already well informed about the structures of governance, familiar with at least some of the conceptual debates and knowledgeable about the instruments available to "make youth policy happen". However, unless that experience has been significantly at a European level, the manual will provide additional information on the European infrastructure of youth policy – its aspirations and guiding themes, governance, funding and delivery mechanisms – that may strengthen argument and advocacy for youth policy at national, regional and local levels. To help the readers engage with the content, the manual is structured in five parts.

- ▶ Part 1 is dedicated to concepts and ideas of youth policy, reflecting also on the dynamics of policy making and implementation.
- ▶ Part 2 describes the landscape of youth policy making at national level in European countries, looking at the diversity of governance systems and structures and roles that different actors play in policy design, funding, implementation and support systems.
- ▶ Part 3 looks at the European and international governance of youth policy and the role and resources available for national and local policy initiatives, from the European Union, the Council of Europe and the youth partnership between the two, to the United Nations system and the European Youth Forum as a platform bringing organised young people's perspectives to bear on policies designed to benefit them.
- ▶ Part 4 looks at instruments and mechanisms through the prism of the 10 themes and the resources developed through research, political debate, resources, tools and funding supporting national and transnational co-operation in the field of youth.
- ▶ Finally, Part 5 briefly explores what the research tells us about what works in youth policy in Europe today.

This manual is a reference tool for initiating youth policy and for learning about the diversity of national and international governance and infrastructure available for youth policy and for review of implementation. We hope the questions for reflection will help you to consider the youth policy puzzle and perhaps build the youth policy architecture in your context, from your own perspective, and will give enough pointers at all stages of policy making. Most importantly, the manual includes a wide range of standards, tools and resources that have been developed by youth policy makers, practitioners, researchers and activist young people across Europe since the publication of the first manual.

Good luck reading this manual for youth policy and making the best use of both the conceptual and more practical material it presents. If you would like to share feedback, reflections and thoughts about the manual, please contact the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership. Let's discover and develop European youth policy making together!

Part 1

Concepts and ideas

Chapter 1

What is "policy"?

Introduction

This chapter briefly considers the idea of "policy", both the wider social and public policy that responds to, and shapes, the lives of all people and the youth policy that in myriad ways – both as a distinct concept and as part of wider policy – responds to and shapes the lives of young people.

Social and public policy

Social policy, at its simplest, is policy within the societal domain. Social policy is concerned with the ways societies meet human needs for security, education, work, health and well-being. Public policy is a broader concept, famously described by Dye (2016) as "anything a government chooses to do, or not to do" but perhaps more usefully depicted as the decisions made by government to either act, or not act, in order to address or resolve a perceived problem. Public policy is a course of action that guides a range of related actions in a given field. It can, therefore, of course, encapsulate the social sphere, and so be "social policy", but it may span issues other than patently "social" ones, from military to economic considerations. While the broad sweep of "classical" social policy, according to Beland and Mahon (2016), has been concerned with issues such as solidarity and social citizenship, particularly through attention to equalities and rights, the authors argue that there are now also three contemporary "big ideas" and challenges in social policy – social exclusion, social investment and new social risks. These are the result of changing economic, social and demographic and, many would now also suggest, ecological circumstances, not least more women in paid work, ageing populations, labour market exclusion of those with low qualifications and the privatisation of "public" services (Taylor-Gooby 2004). This is mentioned here because these issues have an impact on young people from a number of directions and in a variety of ways, and this changes the nature of the imperative for social policy addressing particularly the needs of young people – notably adding further dimensions to the framework of "youth policy".

Policy emerges in diverse, sometimes mysterious and often complex ways. Policy can be enshrined in law, framed by guidelines, expressed through written or oral statements, launched by press releases, anchored in research documents, constructed through strategies or articulated in presentations. Policy emerges, usually, through many different combinations of these. Policy is sometimes described as the essential work of government. As Freeman (2009) has argued, policy formalises and structures the work of government, representing problems and challenges as "questions and positions, interpreting and converting them into decisions, programmes, and instruments". Indeed, as Howard Williamson suggested in his keynote presentation at the

First Global Forum on Youth Policies, policy is developed and implemented through "ideas, initiatives and instruments". The same area of policy (from housing to crime) or the same target group for policy (from children to old people, or mothers to problem drinkers) can manifest itself in many different ways, depending on principles and ideology, knowledge and awareness of programme options available, and the human, material and financial resources that can be enlisted. Like a cake, social and public policy can be sliced in many different ways. Again, somewhat simplistically, the broad aspiration of social policy is to ensure that societies are cohesive and secure, and their people comfortable, healthy and safe. And to achieve that end, policies are put in place to promote positive steps in that direction, prevent negative trajectories and protect those who are more vulnerable – in family life, communities and the economy.

We must also acknowledge right at the start that the politically expressed goals of public policy, when first articulated by government, are subject to interpretation and change as they find their way towards the ground. As Guba (1984) has argued, social policy can be viewed as "policy-in-intention", as having something to say about the purpose of a policy and why a particular policy may have been formulated in the first place; as "policy-in-implementation", including those actions, interactions, and behaviours that occur in the process of implementing the policy; and "policy-in-experience" linked to the experience of the persons whose original needs were targeted in the first place. This is not dissimilar to Evans' (1998) assertion that youth policy has to be considered at three stages: what is espoused, what is enacted and what is experienced. It is an important way of thinking about social and public policy generally, and youth policy in particular.

Wherever the momentum for social policy making may start (and it really can start in any corner of social life), if it is to take root, it ends up for review and ratification at governmental level, which may be local government, national government or, indeed, supranational government (such as the EU) or intergovernmental (such as the Council of Europe). In other words, policy is ultimately approved, progressed and evaluated at the level of politics. Parliamentary committees may conduct their own inquiries into aspects of public policy, and advise or criticise government departments. Departments and other public bodies (such as politically affiliated think tanks) may develop policy that is accepted or rejected by ministers. Ministers themselves may determine policies that are favoured or silenced by more senior ministerial colleagues and their advisers. In other words, even within the political environment, influence over policy development will be balanced in different ways across parliamentary, governmental and non-governmental players.

Prior to political decision making and any subsequent political drive, the evolution of public policy is likely to have been informed by "evidence". It is a popular policy mantra to proclaim that policy is "evidence-based". But what kind of evidence? Cynics sometimes counter claim that the approach is "policy-based evidence", not "evidence-based policy", arguing that policy development only makes use of evidence that squares with the political desire and direction of travel. Evidence that might undermine it is conveniently side-lined or overlooked. Hence the sensible advice that one should not confirm the evidence base of a policy document by looking at the evidential footnotes within it; one needs to look further afield for countervailing

evidence. Indeed, an even more fundamental question underpinning the making of public policy is that of the research framework that has been invoked to drive the policy. In relation to young people, this search for a framework will be discussed below.

Public and social policy therefore embraces a range of political measures directed towards the cohesion and presumed well-being of a society. These are usually grounded in some form of "evidence", though sometimes not (being more spontaneously reactive to events or driven by political whim and presumption); however, "evidence" is a very contestable concept and can be, as we have seen, drawn from and provided by many sources. The evidence behind public and social policy can be constructed in many different ways and for many different reasons. The most obvious public and social policies are those in the domains of education and training, employment, health, housing and justice, though others would include digital, transport, security and environment policies. All affect young people in some way, though some to a greater extent than others.

Youth policy

Youth policy exists in all countries to some degree or another, though it is often not explicit or coherent. Every country has a youth policy – by design, default or neglect. Youth policy, the frameworks of public policy that seek to reach and touch the lives of young people (who are differently defined by age or other criteria across countries), in both emancipatory and regulatory ways, takes many forms and involves a diversity of stakeholders and actors. Youth policy is rarely packaged coherently, though it may have a coherent core. It is invariably a somewhat disjointed mosaic, perhaps bound together with some overarching goals or strands, but more often constituted through a rather disparate collection of statements of intent and practical initiatives that often reveal significant fault lines in logic and consistency when subjected to any overarching scrutiny and analysis.[1] It is also critical to recall and check on the state of youth policy at any particular time. Policies set out in "10-year plans" may in fact last only a week! Pilot measures can quickly become embedded in mainstream policy and practice. Not only do governments come and go, but ministers do too; in both cases, there is likely to be change but perhaps also continuities. Sometimes initiatives carry on, but their name may change. Sometimes the names stay the same but the content of the initiative alters. The message is that the ideas within this reference manual are indicative, not conclusive: youth policy in any context is constantly evolving, shifting its priorities and practices and building from (or rejecting) different forms of "evidence". It is hoped, therefore, that the manual will equip readers with a more in-depth understanding of what shapes youth policy development and implementation, encourage their curiosity to critically interrogate the claims for and constitution of youth policy in their context, and arm them with the knowledge and skills to advocate for strengthening opportunity-focused, rights-based and democratic youth policy.

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1. The classical, not completely hypothetical, example is of children's ministers invoking the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and celebrating young people as a resource whose voice must be heard, while down the government corridor the justice ministers are ignoring the said Convention, proclaiming that young people are a problem whose behaviour must be sanctioned, if necessary by more routine loss of liberty.

Conclusion

This short chapter has sought to convey the critical message that the vague but often attractive concept of "policy" invariably conceals and clouds a range of ideas derived from different sources, designed to achieve different purposes and developed in a range of directions. Within the broad canvas of "social and public policy" lies the idea of "youth policy" – sometimes a distinctive, almost "stand-alone" concept or sometimes embedded within wider social policy, and often both.

Questions for reflection

What is the social policy direction/focus in your country?

What influences the public policy in your country?

What are the driving developmental factors affecting the essence and priorities of public and social policies?

What are the underpinning conceptual/philosophical/theoretical foundations and approaches it is built on?

What is the place of youth policy in general social and public policies?

Chapter 2

Debates, approaches, models

Introduction

This chapter addresses what is perhaps the overarching goal of most youth policy: social inclusion. It also considers the mosaic that constitutes the broad framework of youth policy and suggests its foundational elements – dimensions of youth policy which, unless sufficiently developed, will render youth policy incomplete and ineffective.
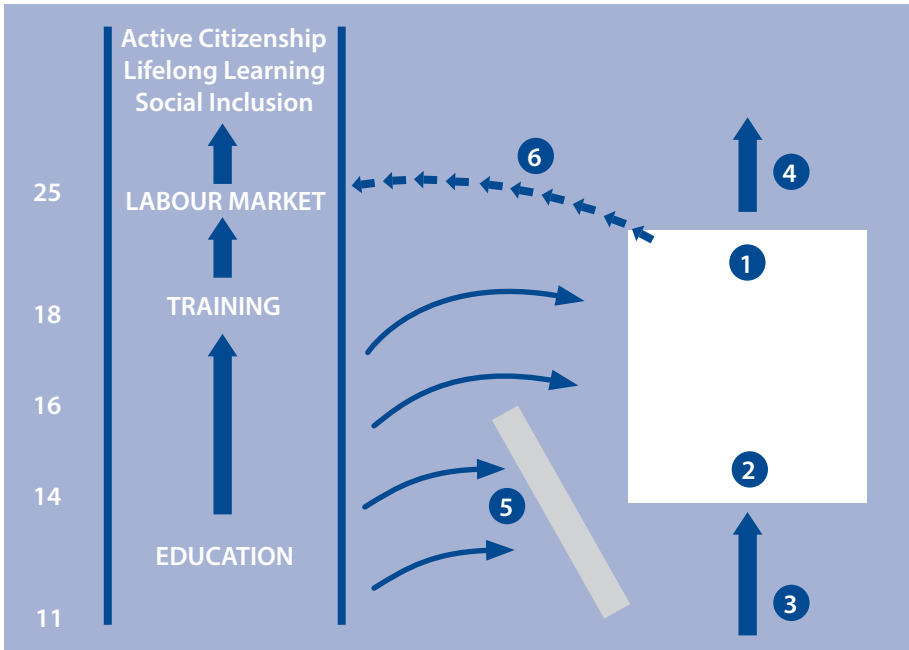
Social inclusion

Arguably, the most significant overarching goal of youth policy, irrespective of its specific themes and aspirations, is to ensure equal opportunities for all young people – to be inclusive through establishing equal access to rights and possibilities. Youth policy often has a "vision" for young people that might be generically described, and is always rhetorically proclaimed, as supporting young people on a pathway (or highway) to successful futures: a vision of active citizenship, lifelong learning, social inclusion, and personal and community safety – originally, in 1999, a youth policy planning framework for the first devolved administration in Wales and later the basis for the Council of Europe youth policy indicators discussions in 2002-03.

However, youth policy also often depicts young people in very different ways and responds accordingly. Where it values young people (for example, those who are "well-behaved" and engaged in education, training or employment), policy is primarily emancipatory and opportunity-focused; where it perceives young people as victims or vulnerable (for example, those who have suffered abuse or who have learning disabilities), policy is more likely to be protective; where it considers young people to be "villains" (for example, those involved in "antisocial behaviour"), policy leans towards more regulatory and restrictive interventions. Of course, most young people are some mix of all three, just as most youth policy is also a similar combination. Youth policy accommodates the promotion of opportunity, protection from harm and the prevention and, if necessary, punishment of "deviance". In short, when most youth policy is carefully interrogated, one finds elements of preventative and promotional practice, support measures that are sometimes non-negotiable, and enforcement (often, ideally, as a last resort). It is the balance of these elements that demands consideration and sometimes challenge.

Despite an explicit determination to combat "social exclusion" in many countries, significant numbers of young people find themselves on the margins on account of circumstances such as early school leaving, health risk behaviours, premature

parenthood or youth offending. As a result, policy not only endeavours to strengthen the barriers required to combat social exclusion but also seeks to ensure there are appropriate bridges to support re-engagement with more positive and purposeful life-course directions. On the specific aspect of addressing social exclusion, there are some simple questions that demand answers, though the "answers" are invariably complex and the implications for policy therefore far from straightforward, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Simple questions, complex answers

Source: Howard Williamson's keynote speech at the launch of the UK Government's Children and Young People's Unit in 2000.

Scale and differentiation

    1. What is the scale of the challenge? How big is the population in the "box"?

    2. How should/could those in the "box" be differentiated?

Causes and consequences

    3. What caused them to slip off, fall off, or be pushed off the main pathway?

    4. What are the consequences if nothing is done, if policy "leaves the kids alone"?

Barriers and bridges

    5. How can the preventative barriers be strengthened?

    6. What kinds of bridges for re-engagement and reintegration are needed?

The beauty of this model for youth policy thinking is that it can be invoked for local, regional and national policy debate, and applied to any group or issue.