1. What are the main urgent (policy-relevant) issues related to youth?

A high fragmentation and a low level of coordination in youth relevant policy fields

Policies concerning youth are implemented at various administrative levels and dispersed across different policy areas. Those that are specifically and explicitly addressing youth are often dependent from the good will of local governments, with little regulation from above. While “explicit” youth policies are mainly concerned with participation, open youth work and extracurricular activities, many other domains that directly affect the living conditions of youngsters (e.g. VET, unemployment, social assistance) seldom adopt a specific “youth” stance. A better horizontal integration (between different policy areas), as well as vertical integration (more coherence between the various administrative levels involved), is thus an urgent area for policy action.

Persistent inequalities in the access to apprenticeship

Switzerland is in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand there are more apprenticeship places available than applicants; on the other hand many young people have serious problems accessing the apprenticeship and must resort to unemployment and social assistance schemes or so-called “bridging” measures. This has to do with the Swiss marketized apprenticeship system that excludes from the start youngsters with negative market signals, which are mostly related to the unequal outcomes in the Swiss three-tier school system. By contrast with Austria, Switzerland never introduced a so-called “training-guarantee” and even if state involvement in the provision of upper-secondary training is growing, it still remains weak. This leads to the fact that youngsters (especially the lower educated ones) have to adapt their aspirations to the few places that are accessible to them.

The blind spot: youth and children in poverty

Even though youngsters’ socio-economic and educational background is recognised as having a long-term impact on their life-transitions and trajectories, neither explicit nor implicit youth policies do currently include large-scale initiatives for tackling cumulative and intersectional inequalities. The recent policy focus on the overrepresentation of youngsters in social assistance hides the fact that this situation has its roots in earlier inequalities in the life-course that should be addressed via redistributive policies in favour of “poor” families.

2. How do existing policies address these challenges?

As the Confederation cannot directly legislate in most policy fields that are relevant for youth (e.g. education, youth policies, child and youth welfare), federal actors opt for “bypass strategies” (Obinger 2005) and sectorial policy adaptation, with the risk however to
privileging one-shot fast-patches rather than coherent reforms. In some other cases (e.g. youth participation), they try to push cantons to develop new orientations, mostly through agenda-setting, benchmarking or funding of “model-projects” (projets-pilotes). This gives “social innovation” in the sense of local policy experimentation a pivotal role, sometimes at the detriment of a wider-ranging and more integrated strategy. This development goes hand in hand with reforms in different social insurance schemes that devolve more responsibilities (and costs) to the local government level. As a consequence, the local level is increasingly asked to deal with more social problems, without always disposing of sufficient resources to do so.

In the realm of VET and in order to improve youngsters’ access to apprenticeship, a federal strategy for vocational training has been developed to increase the inter-institutional collaboration and coordination, with the objective to raise the number of youngsters with upper secondary education to 95% until 2015. But the implementation highly depends on the good will of cantons and its impact is very sensitive to pre-existing organisational factors. In addition, the emphasis on individual measures for bettering youngsters’ employability fails to address the role of ascriptive characteristics (gender, class, race, etc.) in employers’ selection processes. Anti-poverty policies, e.g. the “national program for the prevention of and fight against poverty (2014-2018)”, are – due to the allocation of powers in Swiss federalism – often restricted to attempts at better coordinating already existing policies, and providing a better monitoring of the at-risk population. It emphasizes four “thematic action fields” to be tackled in conferences, exchange meetings and online platforms.

On the level of “explicit” youth policies, several initiatives attempt to install a better intercantonal coordination, with federal actors seeking to foster (more than it was the case some years ago) the development of participative schemes in each canton. The recent law on youth activities (2013) actively supports “innovative projects with model-character”. Innovative projects are defined in terms of “novelty” (i.e. never done before), and are not related to a broader notion of social innovation.

The implementation of youth related policies provides nevertheless ample space for actors to experiment at the local (cantonal and municipal) level. In the canton of Vaud, this led to the institutionalization of practices initially developed by third sector organizations and aiming at a close follow-up of youngsters in transition to work. This underlines the fact that the expertise of local youth organizations might be well recognized by policy-makers. On its side, youth participation is encouraged essentially in adult terms and through parliamentary forms. In fact, many youth organs (communal youth councils and cantonal commissions) are recognized as legitimate arenas for youngsters to make their voice heard.
3. How to increase capability-friendly policies in Switzerland?

In light of the above considerations, policies in the realm of youth (and in particular those aiming at tackling disadvantage and inequalities) would certainly take advantage of the following remarks:

a.) There is a need for a better horizontal (i.e. transversal to the different policy fields tackling youth issues) and vertical (i.e. linking the various administrative levels) integration of youth policies.

b.) While educational inequalities are increasingly evoked in public discourse, reforms should not focus solely on the schooling system. Redistributive policies in favor of lone parents and low-income families are also required for overcoming and tackling inequalities.

c.) Youth participation concentrates mostly in formal organs, according to a parliamentary or a first and foremost for adults relevant model. Other forms and other arenas for participation should be fostered, in order to lower the thresholds and facilitate the self-representation of less visible groups (especially youngsters without a Swiss passport).

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