The situation of young people in Europe and policy answers: GERMANY

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

(1) Youth disadvantage is predominantly understood in terms of “NEETs” (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and subsequently nearly all programmes and measurements are framed within a school-based and employment-centred transition regime. Anyhow, poverty rates of the age group from 15 to 30 years – and particularly people between 20 and 25 years – are the highest in relation to all other age cohorts. Additionally they were rising fastest in the last 25 – and especially in the last 10 – years. Youth poverty is mostly measured and evaluated as a high rate of dependence from social benefits. Youth inequality is not perceived in an intersectional perspective. Hence, a multidimensional evaluation of youth poverty for policy making and social accounting, which goes beyond income quality, is still lacking. Against the background of the project, poverty should not merely be understood as material poverty, but as the absence of opportunities.

(2) Since the 1980’s, formal educational standards in Germany continuously increased, while within the same time frame poverty risks and income inequality massively accumulated as well – more considerable than the average of all OECD states. Nevertheless it became naturalised in public discourses that material inequality is a consequence of educational inequality. Against this background one can observe the tendencies that people affected by poverty – and especially parents of poor children – are ascribed the responsibility for their situation, while socio-economic and political constraints of opportunities lost sight. The empirical evidence, that unequal social and class positions retrieve again in formal opportunities having a “successful” educational career are being turned into their opposites.

(3) There are several areas where disadvantages are identified (but even not enough from research) and not addressed by government policy, such as: unplanned discharge from measurements as well as young care leaver. In almost all countries young people who grow up in care (e.g. residential homes, foster families) are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of educational outcomes. The youth policy of many European countries – and of Germany too – has so far barely acknowledged the difficulties these groups of young people face with respect to their chances of making a successful transition to independence following life. Oddly enough, while transition management is a main strand in current (labour-market orientated) policies, young persons who fail in the standard routes of institutions are getting even more vulnerable.
2. How do existing policies address these challenges?

In Germany one can observe the contradictory situation that municipalities predominantly have to deal with poverty and its surrounding social problems in a financial and professional perspective, but their local budgets are pruned and limited so that accompanying programmes are hardly build up. A national strategy or rather joint-up social policy concerning youth poverty as well as formal opportunities in the transition from school to work is missing. In addition to this, we have to say that although social service organisations daily work with young poor clients, they know very little about structural conditions of youth poverty and there is hardly any political advocacy, where the situation of young poor adults is brought up to policymaking. Only two (quite new) initiatives concerning youth poverty from two third sector organisations established an internal and public “image campaign” to uncover this social problem\(^1\). While there was a big shift to a “no child left behind” policy in the last years, a visible youth (poverty) policy remained a blind spot. Furthermore the nationwide „centre for an independent youth policy“ (CIYP) currently develops a tool for youth mainstreaming called “Youth Check”. It should work as a guideline for divergent policy areas and ministries. The essential question is, if this youth check is coming along with political power (i.e. veto rights) or if it remains a dead letter.

3. What should be the content of "new" policies?

Until now, social innovation was seen as an institutionally driven perspective, where new programmes and measurements were established and tried to tackle uprising social problems. Governmental and non-governmental actors are seen as the agencies for social innovation. But youth participation is now seen as the social innovation per se. Derived from the EU youth strategy, several policies in Germany occurred, where an independent youth policy was proclaimed and a broad focus on youth should be established.\(^2\) In line with these newer ways of dealing with youth policy, participation becomes omnipresent in public discourses and politically postulated and promoted. Participation is often seen as a means for other ends and vice versa. Finally it has to be questioned if these processes are more than “symbolic innovations” and give rise to the power of young people and their perspectives in policy making processes. Youth policy faces the ambivalence that on the one hand political responsibilities are not clear cut (there is no policy “of a piece”) and on the other hand every policy field can influence the situation and opportunities of young people (i.e. urban policy or transport policy). Furthermore there exists no genuine (and holistic) youth reporting on a municipality level. A perspective on societal conditions of growth

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\(^2\) Three main initiatives were highlighted in the German report: the European “Structured dialogue”, the national “centre for an independent youth policy” and a regional initiative from North Rhine-Westphalia called “Umdenken - Jungdenken”. 
(which are shaped by forms of institutionalisation and situated conflicts) or a decisive perspective on unequal conditions would increase capability-friendly policies.