The Socio-Economic Political Context for Addressing Youth Unemployment in Switzerland

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Introduction

This report focuses on youth policies in Switzerland. It provides a multi-focal analysis of current policy making in relation to disadvantaged youth. Due to Swiss federalism, it considers both the federal orientations in this realm and their implementation at a regional level, in relation with existing support network and local issues concerning youngsters.

Methods

The methodology entails (1) a literature review that integrates legislation, official reports, and parliamentary discussions in order to track the policy-making process; and (2) a discourse analysis of expert interviews, focused on the identification of main developments, issues and trends, as well as the construction of youth as a target group of policies.

National definitions

Disadvantage is far from being a “common” word in the vocabulary of policy-makers, especially when it comes to youth. Nevertheless, debates and initiatives have emerged during the last decades to tackle the NEETs phenomena and provide individualized measures for bettering “employability” and transitions to work. The Swiss transition regime is usually described as “employment centered” and characterized by a highly stratified educational system and the predominance of (dual) vocational training. Employers decide autonomously if they provide apprenticeships and whom they provide apprenticeships, which foster competition between pupils coming from socially highly hierarchized school tiers. This leads to a negative group stereotype about the low “employability” of school leavers from the lower tiers, who are more likely to meet the NEETs categorization and enter social assistance, where a third of all recipients are below 18 years (75,000, resp. 29.9%, OFS 2013). This is especially true for youngsters of the economically less well-off families. Switzerland’s transition regime has, like other continental welfare states, a familialist character in comparison to “universalist” transition regimes. The institutional specificities of the Swiss educational and welfare system thus generate specific groups of disadvantaged: young persons with migration background (three tier school system and selection processes at the entry into working life), young persons with single parents (due to the relatively strong male-breadwinner orientation) and those growing up in “poor” families.

Policies, instruments and levels of intervention

Swiss federal authorities carry out few national measures which explicitly tackle inequalities and disadvantage among youth. As many interviewees confirmed, competencies towards children and young people are essentially left to cantons and municipalities, the federal state...
playing a subsidiary role (i.e. supporting specific initiatives). The federal level governs only VET and upper secondary education, the unemployment insurance and some minimal regulations for youth and children rights (fixed in constitutional articles). As the cantons are also responsible for the implementation of these policies, even these more “standardized” approaches show a high degree of regional variations in the line of executive federalism. As a common characteristic (both at the federal and the cantonal level), youth policies are usually not conceived as including fields like education, employment and training, even though they have a considerable impact on the living conditions and capabilities of youngsters.

Policy making, implementation and participation

Swiss multi-level governance system involves a broad range of actors and gives birth to various institutional arrangements, according to the characteristics of the regional context (political majorities, geographical location, economic networks, etc.). Focusing on the case of the canton of Vaud, our analysis highlights the various measures targeted at “youth in difficulty” as well as the actors involved. The implementation of the FORJAD scheme, for example, is based on a “social investment” approach to “youngsters in difficulty”, in which considerable resources are devolved to the labor market integration of young persons. A multitude of local, third-sector organizations are subcontracted by the state in order to provide integration services. The governance of provider organizations is on the one hand accompanied by a focus on performance indicators, mainly the rate of persons who could find an apprenticeship after participation, and on the other hand, seems to involve a lot of negotiation and exchange between providers and purchasers. As youngsters’ needs and aspirations are barely audible in the realm of “hard” policies, unless they meet the requirement of “realism”, youth participation appears to be circumscribed in the official democratic organs (youth councils and commissions) and in the design of projects, which refer to a narrow conception of youth policy (open youth work, youth forums, etc).

Social innovation and the role of social innovation in the delivery and development of existing and new youth policy

Social innovation is an implicit topic in Swiss policy-making. As described above, due to the separation of competencies about youth related issues both at the horizontal and vertical level, the national state can influence policies concerning youth only in a sectorial and limited manner. We identified two ideal-types of social innovation. Social innovation can happen in a top-down way, insofar it is used as a policy coordination tool at the federal level. In this case, social innovation is used by central state actors to foster local experimentation (at the cantonal or communal level), which is then disseminated across different levels and spheres. Social innovation may also happen in a bottom-up manner. In these cases, local actors develop innovative policies, identify local needs and flexibly respond to these needs. Whether or not these policies are later on institutionalized and up-scaled, these processes often entail a process, in which a social problem is re-framed from a new perspective.

Discussion and conclusions

Despite the fact that our report could discern certain critical policy shifts, leading to a better consideration of young persons in some policy domains, institutional specificities lead to slow processes of political reforms - this can amongst others be observed in the case of the new law...
on youth policies. The weak thematization of disadvantage and inequalities in youth policies is also an outcome of a fragmented political system with responsibilities at different administrative levels and throughout different policy fields. The relatively late implementation of Swiss-wide reporting on education (2010) or on youth bears witness of this orientation. Nevertheless, as administrative units (cantons) are relatively small, and third-sector organisations traditionally have a strong stake in providing services, much social innovation exists on the local level. The same applies to the “vertical” and “horizontal” integration of different youth policy fields. Despite the fact that certain political actors are promoting a resolutely transversal youth policy, such a conception could not be implemented until now, leading to the fact that different policy fields relevant for youth work with quite divergent informational bases of judgements in justice. This is a central point of divergence, for instance with France ("priorité jeunesse") covering issues from citizenship participation to labour market integration, or the much older but similarly transversal German law on Child and Youth Services (KJHG), being an own book integrated in federal social laws and covering issues from foster-care to open youth work.

Regarding the definitions of “disadvantage”, and the informational basis of youth-related policies, institutional fragmentation has a significant impact too. While actors from youth encouragement activities usually focus on young persons as future citizens, highlighting issues of civic participation, participation in public life and extra-curricular, free-time activities, actors from social assistance and labour market actors usually highlight young people’s role as the workforce of the future or as a cost factor. This coincides with an interpretation of young people as a cost factor for the community (in the case of young people without educational certificates) or in terms of a lack of skills required in the economy (when it comes to VET).