Politics of Participation? Soft and Hard Policies in German Youth Policies

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This paper focuses on the socio-economic political context and its implications on youth policies in Germany. It examines the issue of inequalities among youth with particular emphasis on “youth poverty” and “youth participation”. For both topics, current policies are reviewed. The analysis mainly concentrates on statistics and policies on the national and regional level.

The situation of vulnerable young people is not restricted to aspects of poverty, unemployment, or disadvantages in the educational system. Examining questions of vulnerability and inequalities among young people, always requires to look also at the constraints and enablements of the life young people want to realise, and at their access to objects, relationships and practices they appreciate and have reason to value. Insofar, poverty is not merely understood as material poverty, but as the absence of capabilities.

After an introduction and explanation of the methods used in this investigation (chapter 3) and a demonstration how inequalities are defined and measured in Germany, the report focusses especially on youth poverty as a current issue as well as on the labour market position of young people (chapter 4).

Empirical data and deeper analysis on youth poverty is still a desideratum for research in Germany. While there was a main focus on child poverty (and as well “children at risk”) in the last years, a discussion about youth poverty remained a blind spot. 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.

Concerning the labour market position of young people, the access to vocational training (especially in the dual system) is the main dividing line on the labour market. The three mentioned aspects – inequality in the school system, insufficient training positions on the apprenticeship market and the aspect of “certificate poverty” – are not only characteristic for the situation (and the expansion) of the transition sector, they are relevant to all efforts within this context. Again, the question arises if the established institutions and organisations reproduce inequalities rather than reducing them.

Insofar youth disadvantage is predominantly understood in terms of ‘NEETs’ and subsequently nearly all programmes and measurements are framed within a school-based and employment-centred transition regime. Youth poverty is merely measured and evaluated as a high rate of dependence from social benefits. Young migrants are often seen as a relevant target group, but their opportunities are not acknowledged under structural conditions and barriers (i.e. institutional discrimination and spatial segregation). Hence, inequality among youth is not perceived in a multidimensional and intersectional perspective and in addition often as a lack of individual aspirations and secondary virtues.

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Insofar a multidimensional evaluation of youth poverty for policy making and social accounting, which goes beyond income quality, is still lacking.

Concerning the policies, instruments and levels of intervention (chapter 5) disadvantaged youth are just partly tackled in social policy, labour market policy (especially the transition sector), educational policy and youth welfare (Youth welfare in Germany not only integrates different forms of care - e.g. residential homes, foster families – but as well life-world orientated youth work, such as youth clubs, streetwork etc.). Though, there is no joint-up policy for disadvantaged youth as such, rather there is a tendency of specialization, juridification and targeting in particular policy areas.

In this manner the political responsibilities for youth policy are not clear cut (chapter 6). While labour market policies are mainly conducted on national level, school policies are a genuine task of the federal states; social policies and youth welfare again are managed on the level of municipalities. Notwithstanding the policy-making power of national politics concerning for example the conditions and ranges of social transfers/benefits, the municipalities have to manage social services and deal with these target (targeted) groups. In line with Germany’s federal structure, youth policy is not only a matter of the national government but also of the federal states, municipal authorities and voluntary child and youth service organisations in the framework of their partnership with public agencies.

Looking at the role of social innovation in the delivery and development of existing and new youth policy (chapter 7) one can observe that social innovation was predominantly seen as an institutionally driven perspective, where new programmes and measurements were established and tried to tackle emerging social problems. Governmental and non-governmental actors (third sector organisations, charity and social welfare organisations, trade unions etc.) are seen as the agencies for social innovation. Aspects of deliberative democracy (i.e. plebiscites, public hearings etc.) are not at the core of public action.

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. This paper analyses three main initiatives of this area on different levels: the “Structured dialogue” on the EU level, the “centre for an independent youth policy” on the national level and a regional initiative from North Rhine-Westphalia called “Umdenken - Jungdenken”. These programmes represent one main strand of - participatively applied and politically regulated - policy answers to the situation of young adults and seem to be characteristic for newer ways of dealing with participation of young adults on the one and legitimising policy making on the other hand. In line with these newer ways of dealing with youth policy, participation becomes omnipresent in public discourses and politically postulated and promoted. Nevertheless it has to be questioned if these processes are more than “symbolic innovations” and unveil the vulnerable situation of youth and give rise to the power of young people in policy making processes.