Combating Inequalities through innovative social practices of and for young people in cities across Europe

CITISPYCE

The key question at the heart of the CITISPYCE project :

"In the rapidly redrawn landscape of deprivation and inequalities across Europe, how might policy makers (at local, national and EU levels) be assisted in their objectives to tackle inequalities through learning from innovative strategies developed for and by young people and particularly those from marginalised groups in major European cities, including an elaboration of the resources and technologies at the heart of these social innovations."

Background

The CITISPYCE project was funded as part of the EU FP7 Collaborative projects scheme. It involved 13 partners from 10 EU countries. The partnership was a mix of universities, municipalities and NGO's with specialisms in the areas of social inequalities and young people. The project commenced on 1 January 2013 and over the next 18 months pursued a detailed work programme of quantitative and qualitative research activity that zoned in from the national level in each country through city to neighbourhood level to map the changing landscape of social inequalities. During the second half of the project, the findings of research were then up-scaled through action with young people who were involved in what might be recognised as innovative social practices that address inequalities facing young people in post-crisis Europe. In up-scaling, we generated spaces for dialogue between young people, policy makers and practitioners at a range of levels.

What we did

The starting point for the project was an assessment of the macro or structural forces *causing* inequalities in each of the partner countries. These were placed alongside what we describe as the *symptoms* of inequalities – the way social inequalities manifest in young people's lives and in their material and social worlds. From hereon we had established a conceptual frame that would guide our subsequent empirical investigations and interactions with policy makers and practitioners: *how can the causes of inequality be tackled through learning from strategies developed by, with and for young people?*

As the research progressed to gathering first-hand accounts from policy makers, practitioners and young people themselves, it became apparent that causes and symptoms were in themselves complex. For example, what appeared to be a symptom could also be a cause. This revealed the complex workings of power as demonstrated in the multiple layers of bureaucracy and governance that mediate relations between the economy and young people. It also exposed the role of city and neighbourhood bureaucracies as well as young people themselves as both re-enforcers of inequalities (through negative mind-sets, anomie) but also as crucial actors in helping to create spaces for change.

The project has been a unique opportunity to put the voices of young people at the heart of discussions about economic and political forces that are having a major structuring effect on their lives. Concomitantly, and in line with our findings, this calls for significant shifts in the way policy makers and practitioners apprehend young people as a category to be worked *with* rather than *on*. This in turn forces us to look anew at the underlying philosophies and mechanisms in our policy making over the past few decades, to assess what changes are urgently needed to better serve and reflect the aspirations and needs of a growing constituency of young people in Europe's superdiverse cities.

How we did it

1st phase: The baseline study This stage involved the examination of the current state of play at EU, national and city levels with regard to tackling inequalities and fostering social innovation through analyses of key secondary statistical data – ten city reports in their national contexts.

2nd phase: Fieldwork Building on the detailed description and analyses of policies, social infrastructure and specific projects working against social inequalities affecting youth in each partner city, we zoomed in on two deprived neighbourhoods, taking into account the opinions of 'experts' and stakeholders through 146 interviews. From this initial phase of fieldwork we also produced a comprehensive map of policy frameworks and interventions in each of the partner cities. The second stage of fieldwork enabled us to gather the lived experience of social inequalities among young people in the deprived areas we surveyed above, as well as their forms of civic engagement and resilience through an ethnographic study. We achieved this through 445 interview and 28 focus groups with young people across the partner cities.

3rd phase: From research to policy This phase comprised three main tasks, following the rationale of action-research. First, we selected the most innovative and apparently effective practices against inequalities uncovered in the fieldwork, and collectively assessed them for their feasibility for transfer to a new context. These were gathered in a Menu of Innovative Practices. Secondly, following more rigorous assessment of these, some innovative practices were selected to be implemented as pilot projects (in the majority of the cases, through the transfer of practices of one city to another). Thirdly, a range of 20 case studies (informed by pilot actions and socially innovative practices) were analysed and assessed following evaluation theories. Key policy messages were, then, distilled for discussion with stakeholders at EU, National and local level.

4th phase: Policy recommendations This final stage drew on the case studies. A policy workshop was organised to discuss key findings and draft policy implications, as well as to gather specific recommendations by areas. These were then put together for review and comment during the Final Conference to be followed by the inclusion of revised policy recommendations in the Final Report together with the rest of the findings.

Key findings

The changing nature of inequalities

♦ Knowledge about the causes of inequality is currently superficial with too much reliance on data sets that ultimately present young people as a problem. Insufficient consideration is given to the views, experience and knowledge of young people themselves. An approach to knowledge about causes is required that associates these with quantitative facts and qualitative evaluation.

♦ Austerity measures across Europe have significantly limited access to good quality education and training opportunities for young people. Many may already have experienced disadvantage through being channelled to low level education tracks segregated from the mainstream.

♦ Policies and interventions to reduce the level of unemployment amongst young people have been – and to a great extent continue to be – focused on moving them into jobs that are low skilled, temporary and poorly paid. These rarely offer opportunities to learn on the job.

♦ In addition, there is a lack of alternative pathways (including signposting towards support) for those young people not in training or employment who wish to 'go-it-alone' outside the formal job creation/welfare support services.

♦ There is over-emphasis on the quantitative measurements of results at the expense of processes.

♦ Deprived neighbourhoods tend to become containers of deprivation severely impacting and limiting the life-worlds of young people (as well as other inhabitants) who reside in them. This also leads to a significant reduction in the possibilities for integration, connection and inclusion in the broader life of the city and nation.

♦ A further consequence for young people of this social exclusion is a retreat into themselves and individualisation that limits the collective action required to tackle the causes of inequality.

For more information about CITISPYCE (partners, case studies, reports) please go to www.citispyce.eu

Social Innovations

The socially innovative practices uncovered in this project address the causes and symptoms of inequalities in different ways. Where the innovative practices address the symptoms rather than causes of inequalities, this represents a means by which young people work to cope with the consequences of inequalities in their lives. It could also be described as 'resilience'.

A key factor limiting the ability of social innovations to have an impact on what could be regarded as structural causes of inequality is their inability to attract capital and human resources on a scale wider than the local. For example, transnational networks of young people and long-term, sustained employment support initiatives sponsored by EU or national governments. Nevertheless, at a local level, through our piloting activities we uncovered that there is capacity to influence the landscape of the policies addressing the symptoms and causes of inequalities when young people and policy makers work together.

Overall, most of the innovative practices we uncovered react to the gaps and failures in the policies and social infrastructures available to young people both in deprived neighbourhoods and beyond.

The case studies in this project illustrate that an important feature of some of the innovative practices is that they address the dimensions of inequalities or social exclusion which are neglected in mainstream policies. Typically, the practices are unique in that they address neighbourhood, individual, spatial and group dimensions, often in conjunction with political/ civic and social dimensions as well as symbolic/ discursive dimensions of inequality. More generally, individual self-confidence, creativity, empowerment, sociability, trust and engagement are strongly supported through innovative approaches.

In these aspects, some of the innovative practices present themselves as alternative models of policy and interventions to prevailing mainstream sensibilities. We reiterate that such alternatives must influence a shift in the policy agenda by changing policy discourses, and 'mindsets' of the policy makers, young people and the public. As a result they may address one of the most important causes of inequalities, which is the inadequacy in the approach of social policies addressing young people.

Adding to the knowledge base

In our work we have mapped a wide range of causes and manifestations of inequality in cities across Europe. We have also found, via interviewing policy makers and young people, at least twenty case studies of innovative social practices. On the way, we produced a menu of more than fifty potential social innovations, matching them against our initial range of causes and symptoms of inequality. Finally, by analysing the data through the lenses of different disciplines within the consortium, we have begun identifying aspects of social innovations which have the potential to address underlying causes of inequality.

In doing this, we have also identified two very important findings which must be the legacy of our project and the starting point for further work.

Firstly, it is indispensable that we take advantage of the experiences, stories and reflections of young people. Previous research has not always placed young people at the centre of its work as we have.

Secondly, it is vital that we do not just "rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic", or reproduce old ways of working. While we recognise that many of the social innovations we uncovered may contribute to alleviating the symptoms of inequalities, some may make a small but significant difference to the lives of young people affected by new forms of social inequality.

But this is not enough - we need to go further. We need to ensure that the recommendations emerging from this project resonate with policy makers and practitioners at all levels . We must encourage them to be more flexible in their responses and to view and do things differently.

Lessons for policy and practice

Our initial reflections have been drawn from each and every phase of the project and have been assessed through feedback and interaction in workshops and conferences. The Final Conference gives us a further opportunity to share ongoing work to gain a deeper understanding of the causes of social inequalities facing so many young people across Europe. It also enables us to consider the role that social innovations developed by and for young people could play in "assisting policy-makers to tackle the challenge of growing and changing social inequalities."

Our findings call for significant shifts in the way policy makers and practitioners regard young people; moving from seeing them as a category to be worked *on* towards one that can be worked *with*. This in turn should force us to look again at the underlying philosophies and mechanisms in policy making over the past few decades. We must, therefore, assess what changes are urgently required to better serve and reflect the aspirations and needs of a growing constituency of young people in Europe's superdiverse cities.

Indicative Recommendations

Institutional approaches to policy making

The prevailing discourses around policies relating to young people need to change. This implies a shift in paradigm that frames our responses to disadvantaged young people differently, away from treating young people as a problem to one which acknowledges and harnesses young people's potentials.

Policy makers and practitioners need to adjust their working relationship with young people away from treating them as a category to be worked *on* to one to be worked *with.*

Support young innovators to fill the gaps and failures in the policies and social infrastructures available to young people as a result of cuts in financial and human resources.

Knowledge and voices of young people

We need to listen more attentively to the voices of young people and draw on their personal knowledge and experiences of inequalities, co-opting them to help in the design and delivery of policies and programmes.

Social practices developed by young people can address dimensions of inequalities or social exclusion which are neglected in mainstream policies and often present alternative models to prevailing mainstream approaches.

Education, training and personal development

Continuing inequality in education systems across the EU limits many young people from actualising their potential. **Policy-makers could work with young providers of alternative informal education and training** (e.g. through peer to peer learning and collective empowerment) to reach those not ready for formal education and/or employment.

Employment and entrepreneurship

Policy-makers at all levels need to widen their perspective on youth employment away from measuring success mainly by the number of young people helped into a job and the speed by which they achieve it, irrespective of the quality, type of contract and pay rates.

Policy-makers could make more effective use of diminishing public resources **by tapping into young people's socially innovative and entrepreneurial potential.**

More opportunities/programmes for alternative pathways into economic activity are needed. for those young people who have "alternative ambitions". (This could include supporting **Small scale pilot initiatives** (like The Loft) in order to see how such innovations can support alternative employment pathways and approaches.

Recognition, trust, empowerment and engagement

Foster spaces for dialogue and communing amongst young people e.g. for sharing ideas and innovating.

Evaluation/Measuring success

We need to move from measurements of impact that are focused solely on quantitative indicators towards ones that incorporate the complexity of the lived experiences of young people. This implies **a change in understanding of 'value for money'/cost effectiveness.**

We need to implement longitudinal client monitoring - city-wide, coordinated by local authorities where possible - at least in countries with sufficient administrative capacity.

"We can make a difference through small, incremental changes by many young people across Europe. What we need is hundreds of little nudges which can be shared and shouted about!"