



Policy Brief

Participatory Policy Making with young people in Chemnitz





Introduction

This policy brief builds on the work of a pan-European study on youth inequality called the UPLIFT project. It addresses some of the key findings from local UPLIFT research in Chemnitz, focusing on the study's implications for public and civil society/NGO actors with responsibility for vulnerable young people's needs in education, employment and urban/housing.

In Chemnitz, a general understanding of the necessity of a balance between top-down regulation and bottom-up initiative in these fields of action has developed. This leads step-by-step to cross-administrational collaboration and the inclusion of actors that generally are not seen as 'normal participants' of youth work or urban development, like young people at the edge of society gained acceptance and esteem. Also, it is a precondition for the diversification of the target groups' formal freedom of choice and to empower them on the level of individual conversion factors. The existence of a robust structure of services and networks with – in the majority – high quality youth work and -vocational training, and easy access to decent and affordable housing constitute a strong resource space.

At the same time, reflexive policy making and a qualitative evaluation of policies and tools implemented remain a challenge to both public actors and civil society youth- and youth vocational work. This was expressed as a cross-cutting issue, by young people and experts – and we are putting young people's voice deliberately first here, in the spirit of UPLIFT.

We recognise that all Chemnitz actors involved in the field currently operate within an extremely challenging environment. They struggle with pressures on time and budgets, challenges of inclusion and democratisation, and other resources. However, European experience suggests that practically and meaningfully engaging young people in the local policy agenda can be achieved with modest resource inputs – and yet it can have a substantial impact on their lives and prospects, and positive effects on local strategic agendas and inclusive urban development objectives too. This policy brief concludes thus with case studies on participatory policy making from elsewhere in Europe.

The UPLIFT project

How do young people experience and adapt to inequality? The UPLIFT project aims to understand related patterns and trends, with a focus on housing, education and employment in 16 urban areas across Europe. The project's partners, with young people and their communities, have developed a methodology that involves young people in the creation, implementation and monitoring of policies seeking to reduce inequalities (piloted in four out of the 16 urban locations: Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Sfântu Gheorghe and Tallinn). For each of the 4 pilot locations, this process has resulted in a so-called reflexive policy agenda. UPLIFT's objective is to come to a new, sustainable, participatory policy process, where young people are actively contributing to policies that directly influence their life chances.

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Key findings in Chemnitz

Vulnerable young people hardly have a voice in policy design and policy evaluation. Formal and informal participation structures that are in the process of being established or which are currently be solidified from temporary projects into longer-term structures, barely focus on the young people and pay scant attention to their needs and capacities. Youth participation structures face two risks: becoming victim of political arbitrariness, and missing an intertwining of the voices/needs of both privileged and vulnerable young people. Where evaluation of youth policies takes place, it is usually internal, quantitative and focused on budgetary management, rather than external, qualitative and focused on the social impact.



No, I can't remember that anyone asked me whether youth policies meet my needs – but actually, I am not really interested in politics. Also, I wouldn't expect the public authorities to be interested in my perspective, in perspectives of people like me. I wouldn't know any politician here to address with my needs.

Where there are limitations to physical or mental capacity, or family violence and a lack of security shape everyday life, education and training are secondary considerations for young people. Research with young people in Chemnitz revealed that around half have to deal with physical or mental challenges that make it so difficult for them to find a job or even to live their daily lives that they are excluded from parts of the primary labour market. The parental home has a similarly strong effect on educational attainment and occupational self-determination. Parental neglect and violence led to particular challenges for the interviewees in coping psychologically with school, youth vocational training or other demands of everyday life. This influences their access to the labour market and the possibility to pursue self-set goals, and leads to them being measured as falling short against what is perceived as “normal”.



There was an IQ test at the employment office where I was below average, so they advised me not to continue my education, so I let myself get insecure and that sucked, and then the employment office talked me out of it. Later on, I obtained a diploma in social work.

Where young people find themselves in unsustainable work environments, social agencies must provide support for change and empowerment. Self-assertion in the labour market is not easy for many interviewees, regardless of disabilities or migration history. Adults who grew up in Chemnitz and were also interviewed as part of the study have gone on to have several experiences of dismissal and problems in the world of work. Only some of these experiences have to do with mistakes in personal decision-making more often, a feeling of futility of their own work or bullying/discriminating working conditions led to demotivation, repeated failure, self-doubt and sometimes major psychological problems. This is, what we call in UPLIFT unsustainable working conditions. Related exhaustion of one's resilience often requires a particularly long recovery period, with many measures to prepare for the next application.



It felt like shit to be the best and get €10 per hour, then I got €11 and others €14-15 ... I took [particularly challenging work] home with me, that was cool, that was fun, that was a world of its own in which you were then immersed.

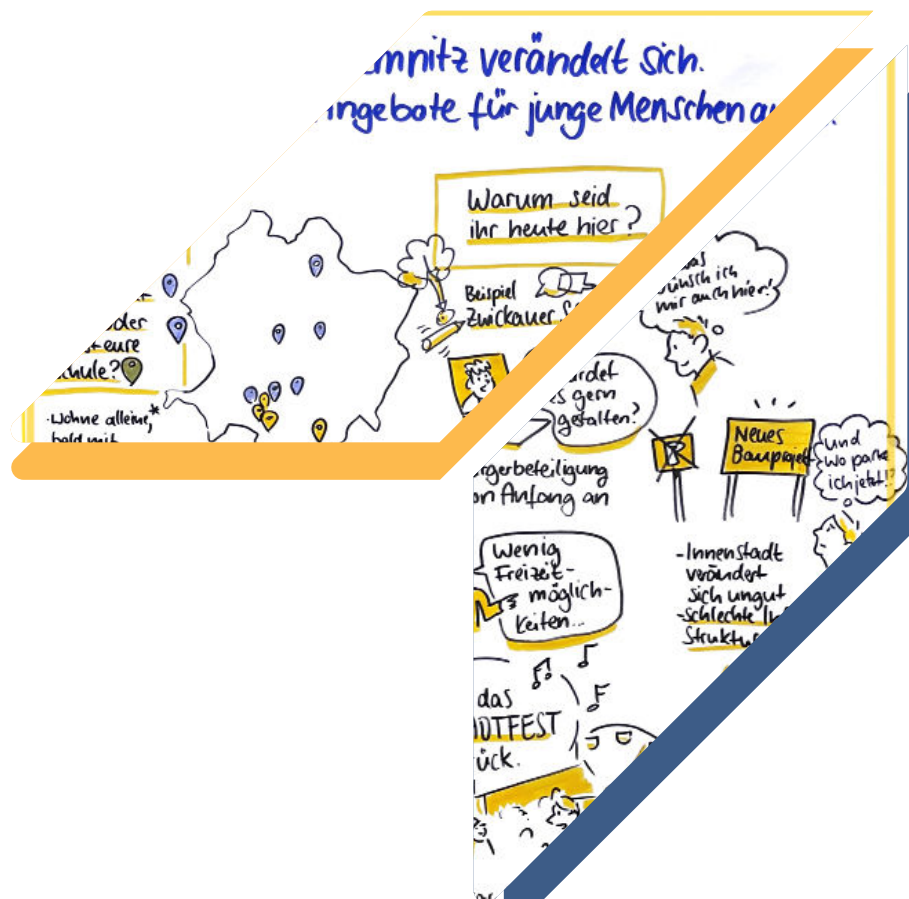


Delphin [which is a local social carrier] helps me to find my position in life, because with a secondary school diploma it is quite difficult. They support me very well, even in crisis situations at work or when I have difficulties with my family; they are the interpreters, so to speak.

Access to housing is important for young people but neighbourhood dynamics and the power of right-wing narratives in Chemnitz pose a challenge. Most of the young people we spoke to value their city as a place to live in the future, but less because of professional opportunities than because of the ties to their families and peers, the easy access to the housing market, and foreseeable change in urban development/public space. However, negative narratives about urban areas (which persist despite the efforts of the city government, civil society actors and anti-racist self-organisation), the influence of right-wing agitation, and negative encounters in everyday life make some of the interviewees think about moving away – regardless their gender, origin and disability. In this context, re-design of public space in their housing environment and youth clubs became an important point of reference in young people’s lives, which was also reflected in the comments of interviewees who are now in their early thirties.



So I, like in the beginning, where I came from, I also thought Chemnitz was beautiful and such a nice city. But everyone said to me: ‘Wait, how can you find Chemnitz beautiful? It’s not beautiful at all’. And then I heard about the right-wingers and the right-wing scene.





Recommendations

Reflexive Policy Making and Reflexive Policy Agendas strengthen the accuracy and impact of policies and also individual empowerment.

Our research on the formal freedom of choice, opportunities and barriers in education, employment and housing and its environment clearly identified the importance of an early assessment as to whether young people and their families understand the variety of formal choices within the educational and vocational training system. An assessment should also explore where this system might have a higher permeability/opportunity for social mobility than they might expect/are aware of. A Reflexive Policy Agenda – also in inclusion oriented urban development – is thus a key tool to inform funding structures and adopting its policies to achieving the desired results. Also, it may help to bridge/reduce the increasing social inequality between privileged and vulnerable young people and sensitise for gender difference. This policy briefs spotlights our core recommendations; more detailed recommendation is given in the second [Urban Report](#).

Vulnerable young people need a voice: for better outcomes and democracy learning

Establishing Reflexive Policy Making, participative re-thinking and co-creation of local Reflexive Policy Agendas with young people reduces the barriers they face in exercising their freedom of choice and improves their social participation. It also increases accessibility and fit of policy instruments, and allows for assessment and re-setting of content, priorities, and methods of participation. Experiencing a role in Reflexive Policy Making forms part of democracy learning. Beyond the institutional level of policy design, outreach youth work and relationship-building are more than ever before as key tasks of youth work - both help to deal with main challenges of current crises, and given time, competence and willingness of public actors, NGOs and single projects/actors in youth-and social work, they strengthen the participation and resilience of all.

Where young people experience physical or mental disabilities, or where family violence and a lack of security shape everyday life, collaborative early intervention is needed to support education and training.

According to our research, such life situations require building/strengthening of a non-competitive network for early intervention, intertwining school social work, (where necessary) school psychologists, youth social work, social workers in assisted living and in youth recreational facilities. Families and young people need a more individualised collaboration, empowerment-oriented case-management rather than care-oriented support.

Such intervention gains impact if there is an evaluation of policy impact and tailor-made approaches. This would require structures to motivate young people and their families to collaboratively and regularly evaluate their existing pathways, in a role of as experts of their own lives. It would help to adjust the educational and the support system, its processes, tools and communications.

Co-creation of youth employment policies should be adopted to lead to more sustainable work environments and better outcomes, both on the institutional and the individual level.

To create a sustainable working environment and reach a corresponding work engagement by young people, specifically vulnerable young people, earlier intervention/prevention needs to happen within companies. It should include clear communication on the importance of one's own health and anti-discrimination measures.

Within the existing institutional framework, instruments/measures to better access vocational training and professional work, such as *Berufsvorbereitungsjahr* (vocational preparation year) and *Berufsvorbereitende Bildungsmaßnahme* (vocational preparation measures) should be strengthened, based on a gender sensitive Reflexive Policy Agenda for the diversification of the professional fields to be accessed with these instruments/measures. Such a reflexive process is much more effective when it forms part of a regular policy evaluation.


Co-creation of a sustainable, meaningful and appreciative work-environment is, however, not only an institutional task. It requires also a systematic opening of the private labour market for people with different talents and with and without disabilities, accompanied by company-specific anti-discrimination and anti-sexism action. Engaging and educating private businesses and providing incentives for better practices remain nevertheless institutional tasks.

Reflexive Policy Agendas for Chemnitz as a place to live in the future

Reflexive Policy Agenda development with young people could improve the effectiveness of urban development policies and activities targeted at young people, while contributing to the individual self-confidence of participants, as well as local/socio-spatial individual and community self-confidence. Thus, three policy areas around housing in Chemnitz could benefit from Reflexive Policy Agendas, developed with young people:

- Development/safe-guarding attractive and free leisure facilities and family and youth centres in the neighbourhood, including upgrading urban development measures, especially of the public open spaces in large housing estates.
- Changing the persistent negative narratives of the city, notably to resist right-wing influence on the ground and prejudices from outside at the local level. Apart from image campaigns included in the INSEK 2035 and the Cultural Capital 2025 and activities linked to the Local Action Plan for democracy, tolerance and a cosmopolitan Chemnitz, a designation of "safe spaces/shelters" in case of right wing/racist attacks for all Chemnitz urban areas could be addressed. This would need partnerships with the WG Prevention of Radicalisation, the various Chemnitz projects to promote democracy education/ promotion, the project Mobile counselling against the right and neighbourhood socio-cultural and consumption structures.
- Development of collaborative (neighbourhood based) and individual (household based, personal) approaches to climate change and energy poverty, recognising the impact of energy poverty on individual psychological resilience and participation.

Social aspects of inequality, such as the digital gap observed with young people and the lack of gender sensitivity, are important factors in determining life paths, where action is seen necessary by professional experts. They should become cross-cutting topics for a potential Reflexive Policy Making Agenda.



How to involve young people in policy formation

Participatory policy making takes as its starting point the position that policy can only be responsive to the needs of individuals, households or communities if it is transparently developed, implemented and monitored in cooperation with its intended beneficiaries.

The UPLIFT project extends this to a process of “Reflexive Policy Making”, which becomes embedded on an ongoing basis. RPM aims to change the approach of policy designers and increase the capabilities of young people in order that they can generate changes together.

During the process young people are empowered to be able to enter into policy discussion with policy makers and implementers. The process is supported by facilitators who help build trust and common understanding among both young people and institutional stakeholders.

The UPLIFT project has produced a range of materials to help local groups undertake Reflexive Policy Making processes. You can find out more about the process in our additional [policy brief](#), and on each of the key stages in our [Guidebook](#), along with training materials and videos on [our website](#).



Stages in the participatory policy creation process



A mindset and commitment – Policy co-creation is a deep process which requires commitment from all stakeholders and a willingness to challenge traditional power dynamics.



Preparation – Planning with stakeholders about objectives, roles, resources and capacity.



Creating a youth board – In collaboration with a range of organisations, using supportive and inclusive methods, a diverse Youth Board is recruited.



Narrowing the focus and scope – Young people and institutional stakeholders identify the policy areas for action. The decision about the scope has implications for the way in which the co-creation process is organized and the expected outcomes.



The co-creation process – Capacity building, trust building and creative activities underpin successful co-creation. Involving a specific youth facilitator is key to an equal, safe and empowering process for all participants.



Towards a policy agenda – The stage at which the institutional and systemic realities must be navigated to identify what can be achieved in practical terms.



Policy implementation – Highly dependent on the local context, communication and engagement is essential to achieve uptake of the policy recommendations.



Reflection & evaluation – Throughout the process it is essential to engage in reflexive practice – continually learning and evaluating to inform next steps.





Examples from across Europe

A local Youth Board collaborated with the Municipality, housing association De Key, resident organization IWOON and Delft University of Technology in order to shed light on the current housing problems of young people and formulate shared policy approaches and tools to tackle the most urgent problems.

Over two years, the Youth Board: developed a range of ideas for tackling the housing shortage, including a virtual platform for young house seekers which is being explored for development, and produced a manifesto for the municipality of Amsterdam which was presented to the Municipal councillor responsible for housing in the city.

The Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres (AYEC) collaborated with the University of Tartu to improve services benefiting NEET youth and, in particular, improve their educational attainment and outcomes and access to the labour market. 40 young people in vulnerable life situations were involved in the process in order to shed light on the current education, employment and housing problems facing young people and the solutions that young people see feasible to tackle their problems.

In the co-creation with young people, a new service model has been produced: The "Cross-sectoral NEET-status youth support and cooperation model of services for local governments. Description of the future model". Young people and representatives of different city institutions jointly designed a range of possible support paths (services).



Amsterdam

Barakaldo

A participatory policy making process brought together young people living in the Municipality, policy makers from the Barakaldo City Council and researchers from Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness, who collaborated over nine months to improve urban housing policies for young people.

As a result, the stakeholders involved have developed a reflexive policy agenda including four proposals oriented to adapt these policies to the real needs of the youth. Moreover, the process has been oriented towards the empowerment of the young people involved, allowing them to improve their personal skills, such as their knowledge on the topic, their attitudes and behaviours towards civic participation, their general socio-political skills and interest in urban development planning.

Sfântu Gheorghe

Two groups of stakeholders - a Youth Board (group of vulnerable young people) and institutional representatives - worked on identifying the causes that hinder the access to education for vulnerable young people and how to tackle these. They worked in parallel at first, then in joint groups within the framework of a co-creation process.

During the joint sessions they identified public policy proposals and created an action plan that can be implemented at the local level and can offer solutions to some of the problems identified. Besides these proposals that had been embedded in the Reflexive Policy Agenda, the biggest gains of the activity in Sfântu Gheorghe was that vulnerable young people were empowered to have their voice heard and that the institutional representatives developed a greater understanding of the benefits of cooperation and co-creation.

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