

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

The European Union tackling youth unemployment in times of crisis

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- Since the end of the 1990s, the European institutions have launched initiatives to tackle youth unemployment within the framework of the European Employment Strategy and the Open Method of Coordination. These forms of intervention are crucial in creating common perceptions and approaches to the problem of youth unemployment in Europe and to generating a »common sense« and awareness of it.
- In the approach pursued so far, most of the weight of intervention is on young people (their educational, technical and personal skills) and not on global regulation of their social and economic conditions and the labour market as a whole. This orientation is expressed in the concept of »employability«.
- The programme »Youth on the Move« is a broader and more detailed approach to youth unemployment in Europe. Nevertheless, the innovations mainly consist of an intensification of the orientations that guided European initiatives in the previous decade. The new key expressions are »mobility« and »unleashing young people's potential«.
- The European institutions should reformulate the definition of the problem in order to deal with youth unemployment in a more fair and balanced way, avoiding looking at young workers as »lower quality« workers. Of course, these changes can be implemented only by reinforcing the role of associations and other social agents (trade unions) who provide an alternative voice.



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Introduction

All recent reports and publications on the labour market situation and unemployment in Europe agree that young people are the social group most affected or at least particularly affected by the economic crisis (Rocha 2012; Dietrich 2012; Eurostat 2012).

Within the EU, youth unemployment rates do not provide a particularly nuanced view of the problem. Nevertheless, from 1997, initiatives to tackle youth unemployment as part of the so-called European Employment Strategy have been launched within the framework of »semi-binding« implementation modes, which consist of employment guidelines and non-coercive assessments of implementation through so-called National Reform Programmes. This is known as the Open Method of Coordination.

Despite its laxity, this kind of governance is considered to have diverse possible impacts on national socio-political and economic contexts (the dissemination of concepts and intervention logics; the creation of new approaches to the debate). In this article, apart from describing the EU's political initiatives to tackle youth unemployment over the past 15 years, from the first approaches in 1997 (general considerations as stipulated in the European Employment Strategy) until today (Youth on the Move as part of the EES), we will try to assess the practical and symbolic effectiveness of these measures and answer questions such as: How successful/unsuccessful was the EES with regard to the problem of youth unemployment (Lisbon Strategy/Activation policies)? Are the respective objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy realistic? Will these European instruments help to solve the problem? Are other efforts needed? Which ones? Is a continuation of the soft governance process in employment and labour market policies feasible or do we need to go further? To do so, our work will be based on an analytical perspective, focused on representations of the problem according to the different solutions proposed. This approach is especially useful in assessing those regulatory modes whose main strength lies in spreading the intervention frameworks. This will lead us to consider, first, the characteristics of youth employment and unemployment in the European context and then, the hegemonic socio-cultural attributions assigned to the category »youth« as a whole, and especially to the facts concerning their

integration into the labour market, one of the essential pillars of the transition to adulthood.¹

Applying this analytical approach will lead us to some important conclusions. The pro-active and prescriptive (but not co-active) governance of the Open Method of Coordination is important for creating common perceptions and approaches to the problem of youth unemployment in Europe and to generating a »common sense« and awareness of it. As a consequence, it is essential that the European institutions' proposals, prescriptions and declarations have an appropriate socio-cognitive orientation so that the problem is tackled in a fair and balanced way. Nevertheless, in the approach taken so far, most of the weight of intervention lies on young people and not on global regulation of their social and economic conditions and the labour market as a whole. The concept of employability has been the common thread in the measures against youth unemployment taken by the European Union, and has since been replaced and/or supplemented by terms and expressions such as »activation«, »mobility« and »unleashing young people's potential«. Ultimately, these concepts allude to the need to develop and promote young people's educational, technical and personal skills. All these ideas blame young people themselves for the problem of unemployment and feed those statements that affirm that »young people are not sufficiently trained to hold certain kinds of jobs« (decent jobs, high qualified or positions which involve a deal of responsibility). Therefore, these ideas contribute to reproducing the underestimation and devaluation nowadays suffered by young people in our society. This is why, in the fourth section of this study, apart from stating our conclusions, a list of recommendations are proposed for transforming and improving the role of the European institutions in the fight against youth unemployment.

1. Even if youth is one of the social groups that were hardly hit by the crisis, it is perhaps the most unsupported. Within the framework of this lack of public intervention, the scales were tipped in favour of recreational and educational actions – for example, mobility education programmes – and prevention measures (in terms of drugs and sexually transmitted diseases), aimed at reaffirming youth as a state and not as a »process of transition into adulthood«. Unlike previous policies, so-called emancipation policies try to foster young people's education, work and housing in an interrelated way (Santos and Martín 2011).



1. Youth unemployment in Europe at the core of the economic crisis

In all Member States, young people tend to be more affected by unemployment than their elders (see Dietrich 2012: 13–14). As a consequence, youth unemployment shows some particular and significant characteristics compared to unemployment among other social groups. This is because young people are the future adult labour force. But what are the characteristics of youth unemployment? What happens when these characteristics persist over time?

Youth unemployment is generally defined as »difficulties in the transition from education to the labour market« among people aged between 15 and 24 years of age.² In practice, most EU countries go beyond this definition of the problem. Youth unemployment rates are not only made up of those who have never worked and register themselves as job seekers for the first time. On the contrary, the high rate of unemployment within young people is the result, in no small part, of the alternation of periods of employment and unemployment (see Dietrich 2012: 27–29).

We cannot understand youth unemployment without considering the poor quality of the employment to which young people have access. We mean this in the broad sense of bad working conditions: unpaid extra working hours, shifts over 8 hours long, taking on responsibility and assuming tasks that go beyond their work category and stipulated in the terms of the contract, temporary entry regimes with scarce or non-existent protection (internships, professional training, temporary contracts whether through a temporary job agency or not, fake self-employment).

In 2009, most young people in employment in the EU Member States were employees but not all of them had a full-time permanent job, by any means. Indeed, 37 per cent of temporary workers aged 15–24 and 65 per cent of temporary workers aged 25–29 had a fixed-term contract because they could not find a permanent job (Eurostat 2009).

2. This is a common consideration in the studies conducted by the different international institutions (OECD, ILO and so on).

In a large part of Europe, these »bad working conditions« are the main reason for youth unemployment, either because of the short duration of the contracts, which leads to periods of unemployment that become more significant than employment periods, or because the poor working conditions in the job become unbearable and lead to resignation in many cases. Along with the bad working conditions, the lengthening of time over which these conditions have to be borne in some countries, especially in the southern countries of Europe, is a crucial fact that contributes to the scale of youth unemployment. This is why it is no wonder that in countries such as Spain or Greece the characteristics of youth unemployment extend into young people's early thirties (Rocha 2012; Santos & Martín 2011; Van de Velde 2005).

Due to the crisis, these circumstances have got even worse. Youth unemployment has risen exponentially. Between the beginning of 2008 and mid-2009, the EU27 unemployment rate increased from around 15 per cent to 21 per cent and by mid-2012, it came close to 23 per cent (Eurostat, January 2000–August 2012). The Member States display major disparities, however (see Dietrich 2012).

In this section, we have looked at the problem of youth unemployment in terms of its complexity. But what approach to youth unemployment can we infer from the initiatives of the European institutions? To be able to answer this question and assess the appropriateness of those initiatives according to the approach explained in our introduction, first, it is necessary to describe the EU's capacities (tools and procedures) in the field of employment and society. Then, we will deal with the actions that have been implemented and those that are being implemented to tackle youth unemployment.

2. European governance of employment and the labour market

2.1 The emergence of the European Employment Strategy and the Open Method of Coordination

The origins of the Social Europe as we know it today lie in the Luxembourg Process, adopted in November 1997. In it, for the first time, a set of Guidelines was established in the field of employment as part of the European Employ-



ment Strategy, which was included in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997). Later on, the European Council of Lisbon (March 2000) introduced the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), soft regulation («soft governance») with regard to the abovementioned Guidelines in the Member States. The European Employment Strategy³ and its relaunch by means of different sets of guidelines was to be implemented in accordance with this Method. The European institutions proposed a set of Guidelines, consisting of general aims and measures with specific deadlines (in the short, medium and long term) by which they should be implemented and translated into national and regional policies. In an effort to adapt to the Guidelines established, the Member States drew up the National Reform Programmes. Finally, an assessment, revision and control process has been set up by the European institutions, with benchmarks created in order to identify best practices and the results published in the Joint Annual Report on Employment (Serrano 2004).

Together with the statistical benchmarks, which help in evaluating actions and act as an assessment pattern (and therefore, a prescription of improvements for the next project), European concepts and approaches are by themselves an important focus of influence, since they are gradually incorporated into national policies and penetrate their programme's design. This is how the European institutions establish a process according to which there is constant export, appropriation and redefinition of terms which are part of specific national political traditions and are transferred to the agenda of the Member States (Palier 2001; Crespo, Revilla and Serrano, 2005). The content of the European Social Model (ESM) is therefore the result of the way in which different social, economic and institutional agents have appropriated the diverse European treaties and the diverse engagements and alliance strategies set up between them.

The European Employment Strategy and the Open Method of Coordination have great significance, which is not only due to their incidence in achieving the aims of national policies but mainly to the fact that they open up new areas of debate at European level and boost the exchange of experiences between different countries. In this way, they generate what Serrano (2000) has defined as a procedural convergence, whose various

3. The social aims of the Lisbon Strategy are: achieving full employment, fostering quality and productivity at work, social reinforcement and territorial cohesion.

lines include: a syncretic model of social intervention, decentralisation and customisation – personalising services (Serrano 2000:218).

2.2 The European Employment Strategy regarding youth unemployment

Initially, the European Employment Strategy (EES) had four essential pillars: employability, entrepreneurial spirit, adaptability and equal opportunities. Except for equal opportunities, all the pillars have an economic character: they are thought to achieve quantifiable aims, the adaptation of training and education to the needs of industry or deregulation of the labour market in order to increase productivity (Serrano 2000).

Henceforth, «employability» became the main European prescription against youth unemployment. Three dimensions have been identified within this concept (Serrano 2000): prevention, training and activation. Prevention involves obtaining social and procedural skills when seeking a job (managing one's career); training involves pooling knowledge and both general and technical abilities according to the needs of the industry; and activation is identified⁴ with the promotion of «ethical and moral» or personal skills, the kind of attitudes that enable someone to enter the labour market (independence, responsibility, willpower, self-promotion and so on). Thus, in the EES, the concept of employability encourages the implementation of three kinds of policies aimed at young people (the first in the EU): training, career guidance and activation.

Based on this concept, which is one of the EES's pillars, the aim is to spread and boost intervention to tackle unemployment, mainly on the supply side. In other words, the kind of intervention being promoted is not so much for the sake of young jobseekers but their employers, enhancing their attitudes, abilities, capacities and social, professional and personal skills to make them better

4. The concept of activation came to take centre stage in the European debate, adapting the different dimensions of employability and understood in a positive or a negative way according to the kind of labour market supply policies concerned. For example, the training policies which resulted from intervention in the labour market in the Nordic countries were qualified by Serrano (2007) as «positive», while the «moral-therapeutic» interventions typical of the Anglo-Saxon model were considered «negative» activation. In the same vein, we can say that activation has inherited the semantic charge ascribed to employability (Martín, 2009b). Later on, flexicurity achieved the same status with regard to employment and unemployment (Fernández, Martín and Serrano 2012).



workers. Therefore, according to this diagnosis of the problem, youth unemployment is linked to their lack of educational and technical skills, as well as their lack of ethical and moral or personal qualities (lack of discipline, adaptation difficulties, weak work ethic).

The main focus of this first initiative in European policy on youth employment is the transition from school to work. The problem of youth (un)employment is understood on the basis of this sole aspect, while other questions are left aside. These other issues not only contribute to raising the youth unemployment rate, they also point out that the problems that young people have to deal with in their working life are broader and more complex. We are talking mainly about fixed-term employment and precarious working conditions, already mentioned in the previous section.

It was not until 2001, with the White Paper on young people, when the existence of specific social and employment policies directed towards young people at European level was formalised (Gentile 2009; Nowaczek forthcoming). A step forward in this policy's development was the adoption of the European Youth Pact in 2005, a document considered essential for the development of the transversal dimension of youth policies in the European Union. The European Youth Pact was part of the Lisbon Strategy relaunch in 2005.

Regarding employment, the aims laid down were still too general: increasing the youth employment rate and promoting training programmes.⁵ A new boost was also given to the promotion of company and employer social responsibility with regard to young people's labour force integration and measures were taken to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit among young people.

5. These aims were fixed and amplified within the framework of the European Youth Pact and discussed at the European Youth Forum (Nowaczek forthcoming):

- Reducing the youth unemployment rate from 18 per cent to 9 per cent by 2010.
- Reducing by 50 per cent the average duration of the transition from school/training to paid work.
- Promoting high quality education, training and work experience programmes aimed at unemployed young people.
- Improving the quality of education systems to prevent young people dropping out and to foster their adaptation to technological and economic change. Reducing early school leaving by 50 per cent between 2006 and 2010.
- Implementing specific measures for those young people who suffer multiple kinds of discrimination on the labour market (young women, migrants and young disabled).

At the end of 2007, the programme Youth in Action 2007–2013 was implemented. This programme promoted mobility within and beyond the EU's borders, non-formal learning and intercultural dialogue for young people aged 15–28 (in some cases 13–30). Since 2009, Youth in Action has been based on the EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering. This strategy is intended to be the focus of European youth policy for 2010–2018 (Goldrin and Guidoum 2011).

When the concept of flexicurity was incorporated in 2006, the European Expert Group on Flexicurity highlighted the need to make »special efforts« to prevent youth unemployment by means of apprenticeship programmes, training or other employability measures, to be applied within 100 days of becoming unemployed (Nowaczek forthcoming).

Regarding concrete measures, financed through the ESF, throughout the 2000s a Lifelong Learning Programme was launched, which included Erasmus and Leonardo da Vinci programmes, the creation of the PROGRESS programme (2006) for the elaboration of statistics, benchmarks and reports, and the pilot initiative »Your First Job Abroad«, aimed at helping those who wanted to plan their first mobility experience.

After the first half of the period for which the Lisbon Strategy and the first employment policy guidelines were planned (2000–2002, 2003–2005), the first assessments took place. These revealed that the Lisbon Strategy was a failure. The aims were too ambitious and coordination and policy determination were not sufficient (Kok 2004). From 2010, once the period for which the European Strategy had been planned was over, it became common to allude to these measures and aims as the »failed Lisbon Strategy«.

Some authors consider that the OMC has stimulated mutual apprenticeship processes through sharing »good practices«. The European Youth Pact has equally been recognised as an important tool in reaching agreements in the field of European youth policies (Nowaczek forthcoming). However, other authors think that these interventions did not have the appropriate funding and that the effects they had on society were not territorially balanced (Gentile 2009). In addition, in a context in which employment is scarce and lasts only a short time, these measures are totally insufficient and an intervention ap-



proach based on guidance and boosting search abilities makes no sense (Serrano 2000). Activation policies are presented as a way of fighting exclusion, but in fact they reinforce exclusion, mainly because of their coercive nature and because of the poor quality of the options provided (Serrano 2004). On the other hand, the guidelines represent »youth« in accordance with the transitional approach, focused on the insertion of young people in pre-established tasks and roles. They are oriented towards activation and encouraged to elaborate individual professional plans, to get a »better grip« on life and, at the same time, they are forced into a sequential and pre-established transition to adulthood, in terms of real integration opportunities (Gentile 2009). This is how individuals are meant to acquire greater autonomy with regard to how they adjust themselves to the changing »rules of the game«. However, this autonomy will never allow them to seriously challenge those rules (Crespo and Serrano 2004: 43). Empowering young people consists of giving them the possibility to choose, not directing them.

3. Current Landscape of EU Intervention with regard to Youth Unemployment

The European Employment Strategy within the framework of the European Strategy 2020 (»a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth«), under the usual motto of »creating more and better employment«, has the following main objectives:

- achieving employment for 75 per cent of people between 20 and 64 years of age;
- keeping the school leaving rate under 10 per cent and managing to have at least 40 per cent of people between 30 and 34 years of age completing post-secondary education;
- reducing the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 20 million.

It is evident that these objectives are as general as they are ambitious, especially if we take into account that the current economic crisis is likely to have prolonged consequences (especially in Southern Europe).

»Youth on the Move« is a range of measures established within the framework of the European Strategy 2020,

aimed at promoting young people working and studying abroad. This shows that in the Employment Strategy 2020, tackling youth unemployment is a priority, given the scale of unemployment since the current economic crisis began.

As with the measures established within the framework of previous versions of the EES, Youth on the Move invokes arguments such as changes in the current situation and the needs of the economy to give fresh impetus to activation and employability strategies. The main concern is still the transition from the education system to working life. To tackle this problem, two new elements are introduced into activation and employability initiatives: »unleashing all young people's potential«, as an objective, and »mobility«, as a prescription. Therefore, one of the main mottos of Youth on the Move is »Move to achieve – degree, new job, training, your own business«. As a consequence, Youth on the Move seeks improvements in youth education and training in order to improve the job prospects of those starting out and mobility in both the academic field and the world of work.

In terms of more specific measures, the idea is to give fresh impetus to education and training programmes abroad, such as Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus, volunteer programmes (within the framework of the Youth in Action programme), as well as the Leonardo Da Vinci, Comenius and Marie Curie programmes. Promoting working abroad is being translated into initiatives such as »Jobs in Europe« (for job seeking), »Entrepreneurship in Europe« (which provides financial support and information on how to create your own company), »Research in Europe« (to help in developing an international dimension in research careers), Youth@work (to promote contact between young people and small entrepreneurs) and Your First EURES Job (to help young Europeans find a job in other EU countries).⁶ Among them, the sole action for which a new item in the budget has been created through the European Progress Microfinance Facility is »Entrepreneurship in Europe« (Goldrin and Guidoum 2011).

As a part of Youth on the Move, the Youth Opportunities Initiative targets in particular those young people who left school or training without having achieved upper-

6. See: <http://ec.europa.eu/youthonthemove/> (last accessed on 08.10.2012)



secondary qualifications and encourages them to return to school or to enrol in vocational training for in-demand skills. It also targets *graduates* and helps them to find their first work experience (European Commission 2011).

The Initiative comprises a set of measures, planned for 2012 and 2013, to reduce youth unemployment. Member states, in particular those with the highest youth unemployment rates, should take decisive measures in the following four main areas (ibid.):

- (i) preventing early-school leaving;
- (ii) developing skills that are relevant to the labour market;
- (iii) supporting first work experience and on-the-job training (apprenticeships, placements in enterprises and traineeships; vocational education and training, VET);
- (iv) access to the labour market: getting a (first) job.

Among all the recommendations, there is one which is especially specific: »Youth Guarantee« or the »Youth Guarantee Scheme«. This initiative consists of »ensuring that young people are either in a job, education or (re) training within four months⁷ of leaving school, especially for early leavers from education and training and other vulnerable youth« (ibid.). It is intended to be a recommendation, but specific ESF funding has already been foreseen to reinforce its effectiveness.

Youth Guarantee has had a strong impact among some of the European social partners (political parties, trade union confederations, youth associations). In fact, the Party of European Socialists (PES), PES Women and ECOSY-Youth European Socialists are conducting significant lobbying through their campaign »Your future is my future – a European Youth Guarantee now«. ⁸

The European People's Party (EPP Group), on the other hand, is focussing on mobility and training as essential requirements enabling young people to access the labour market. One of their most recent commitments is to »build a young entrepreneurial region«, whose aim is to create an open debate on the best measures to support young entrepreneurship at European level. ⁹

Another major political commitment to tackle youth unemployment in Europe is the one supported by the Youth of the European People's Party (YEPP), a centre-right-oriented confederation of youth associations. This group published a White Paper (»Fighting Youth Unemployment«) in May 2012. In it, they focused on improving vocational training and acknowledging and giving a major boost to voluntary work and non-academic proficiencies. In addition, these institutions demand more effective regulation and well-coordinated programmes. ¹⁰

The youth branch of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC Youth) diverges from the European institutions' action lines supported by the political parties. ETUC Youth is focussing on reinforcing young people's rights and their representation in the workplace, in putting an end to discrimination suffered by young people and achieving full citizenship, as well as collective action. Their motto is »Alone, it's much more difficult«. ¹¹

As it happened in the previous initiatives (from the late 1990s and 2000s), in the EES for youth a causal relationship between training and employment is considered natural. Knowledge is understood as a set of skills that qualify the person to get a job. The logic of this idea consists of »training = employment = means of life«. As we will explain in our conclusion, nothing could be further from the truth.

4. Do We Need More or Do We Need Better?

The fight against youth unemployment in the 2000s started as part of the social content of the European Strategy 2010 and developed throughout this decade. The main milestones in the promotion of youth social policies were the White Paper published in 2001, the European Youth Pact of 2005 and the Youth in Action Programme launched in 2007. From the very beginning, »employability« became the cornerstone in the fight against youth unemployment and the Open Method of Coordination, the way of managing actions and ideas that favoured its promotion.

7. It was six months at the time of launching the YOM.

8. See: <http://www.youth-guarantee.eu/> (last accessed on 08.10.2012).

9. See: <http://www.eppgroup.eu/press/showpr.asp?prcontroldoctypeid=1&prcontrolid=11025&prcontentid=18460&prcontentlg=en> (last accessed on 08.10.2012).

10. See: <http://youthpepp.eu/news/representatives-33-centre-right-youth-organizations-adopt-declaration-youth-unemployment> (last accessed on 08.10.2012).

11. See: <http://youth.etuc.org/en> (last accessed on 08.10.2012).



After the resounding failure of the Strategy 2010, which was accentuated by the crisis, the policies to tackle youth unemployment within the European Strategy 2020 had a wider and more detailed development, which was reflected in a wide action programme known as «Youth on the Move». Nevertheless, the innovations adopted by Youth on the Move consist of an intensification of the essential orientations that guided the European initiatives to tackle youth unemployment in the previous decade. Therefore, the dimensions of training, activation and guidance were emphasised throughout, while a new key concept «mobility» was incorporated.

Within the programme «Youth on the Move», young people are still considered the problematic element in their relationship with the labour market since they are still supposed to make an effort to keep training themselves, to move, to adapt to the market's needs and to plan their working lives. Nevertheless, training or setting up projects does not put an end to uncertainty or instability. If the necessary employment infrastructure is not in place, what use have these projects or training when external possibilities for their realisation are lacking? Reinforcement of the dimensions of employability within the framework of Strategy 2020 means reinforcement of the paradoxical nature of these initiatives, regarding their content and a redundancy regarding their implementation mechanism, the soft governance of the OMC. The reference to adaptation (the new dress of employability) in the context of «mobility», lifelong learning and individual vocational guidance, means much more since it not only implies versatility with regard to capacities, abilities, attitudes and professional skills. It also demands personal abilities such as adaptation to different geographical and cultural environments, and this implies a double personal effort. Serrano (2000) highlights the paradoxical character of the psycho-sociological work fostered within the framework of these initiatives, since, on one hand, it encourages empowerment to allow people to take over their own lives, and on the other hand, this work is aimed at encouraging people to adapt to job requirements.

The question is: Are the specific problems of unemployed young people and the causes of the production and reproduction of unemployment (sporadic employment, high rates of temporary employments, uncertainty, underestimation of young people's technical capacities and moral qualities in the field of work) tackled by the EES?

Does the promotion of employability and activation sort these problems out? Does the increase of training initiatives or the promotion of mobility solve them?

European institutions' initiatives to tackle youth unemployment are not only insufficient compared to the highly general and ambitious aims. Their approach is also misguided. To put it more simply, if we asked what the problem is according to the European initiatives, the answer would be: individuals. And if we asked why individuals are a problem, the answer would be: because they lack the willingness and personal, technical or educational abilities to adapt to the new economic/labour context. Youth unemployment is explained in terms of personal defects and a lack of maturity. Very limited social and political value is conferred on young people's employment, which could affect their expectations and motivation and jeopardise their work ethic.

Regarding the governance in terms of which the EU's initiatives to tackle youth unemployment are implemented; there has been frequent criticism of the laxity and lack of determination of the OMC. This makes it insufficient to deal with problems with a specific and especially complex character in the economic contexts of the Member States. However, we must acknowledge that at present the EU lacks the legitimacy and the institutional structures needed to replace its *soft governance* by *strong/hard governance*.¹² However, what seems to be a weakness is also a strength, as the OMC provides the EES with an important socialising role, encouraging the dissemination of the problem's description in a specific way (Serrano 2000).

As a consequence, our proposals are oriented towards taking a radical spin on the ideological line of the actions proposed by the EU to tackle youth unemployment. Some of the general and specific recommendations that might be necessary to induce a change in the policies to tackle youth unemployment are stated below.

12. Generally, good practices are only good in the countries in which they are genuinely implemented. No country's culture or institutional tradition can be trivialised. In addition, generally, the assessment of policies makes sense within a country, since the most important thing is not what was achieved but the fact that they constituted an improvement compared to previous policies.



General recommendations

First of all, it is important to approach the subject of youth unemployment in terms of the whole relationship between young people and the labour market. This means taking into account links and synergies between the kind of employment that young people have access to and their unemployment situation. Therefore, we suggest going a step further in the definition of youth unemployment as a problem in the transition from the education system to working life. We propose to take into account for a new definition precarious employment conditions and the so-called »hidden unemployment« that they give rise to (Serrano 2000: 100). In this vein and according to European intervention modes, first, it is necessary to raise benchmarks to assess precarious work and hidden unemployment, so that we can determine the scope of the problem.

Second, the actions must be approached from the point of view of the aspects which unite young people in their relationship with the labour market, instead of fragmenting intervention modes, so that promoting stigmatising policies and working careers is avoided.

Last but not least, it is essential to fight against the approach to young workers as »lower entity« workers, in other words, less qualified and less competent workers with less abilities. The idea is to fight against the personal, social and professional underestimation and discrimination that young people have to deal with in trying to access the labour market and during the first years of their working life. To this end, all discourses and initiatives that are based on and promote this representation must be rejected. To sum up, »employability«, »activation« and »flexicurity« must be removed from their hegemonic position.

Usually, with regard to the labour market, young people show qualities and characteristics that contradict the problems diagnosed by the European institutions:

- Generally, young people are the most committed members of the labour force as they face their first working experiences. This is why they do not need additional stimulation or motivation (activation). In addition, young people are usually more easily inclined to mobility. It is not necessary to urge them to embrace mobility but instead to give them an opportunity to choose between

moving or not, or to choose the place to move to. Opening Europe's borders and making work mobility easier must not replace national employment policies. Far from it, the aim should be to provide the best opportunities possible, both for those who stay and for those who want to move (Nowaczek forthcoming).

- In recent decades, young people have become much better trained than previous generations. As a consequence, insisting on appealing to education, apprenticeship, individual training and so on in the context of European initiatives is paradoxical (considering the existence of over-qualification) and is frequently used as a political resource to postpone the age at which young people access the labour market (Serrano 2000). The criteria for selecting the labour force have become rather soft (personality and intelligence: willpower, perseverance, discipline), which makes the wide set of academic credentials useless (Serrano 2000; Gautié 2004). Finally, it is important to highlight that the »knowledge society« model does not match all economies and all sectors. Therefore, lifelong learning and continuous retraining are unnecessary in many sectors and working fields.

- Although young people lack long work experience, we have to take into account that, thanks to their high motivation, within a country's labour force, they are the most willing age group both regarding attitudes, apprenticeship abilities and the acquisition of practical skills. Dynamism and creativity are other qualities that become especially significant among the youngest workers.

As a consequence, young people do not need so much training, temporary internships or mobility support as trust and decent working opportunities (employment infrastructure).

Specific measures:

- To implement a set of measures to acknowledge the value of young people in the world of work and to stop discrimination. This acknowledgement should be shown on two different fronts simultaneously:

- Promoting the regulation of a labour market that boosts stability and continuity in young people's working careers. Promoting employment policies for young people and not for the over-exploitation of their capacities by enterprises.



- Reformulating the problem according to the general measures stated herein. Implementing a cultural and ideological transformation in the political discourse on young people so that it becomes mainly aimed at transforming the existing representation of it, which turns young people into »lower entity« workers.

- To boost the integration of practical experience through the different formal education programmes (school, high-school, university, vocational training) in order to complete theoretical training and widen its possible application. To promote the existence of links that enable the development of theoretical knowledge and training within working life. To guarantee that these are high-quality, useful experiences, whose value is acknowledged both by young people and by the labour market.

Obviously, all these changes can be implemented only by reinforcing the role of associations and other social agents (trade unions) who defend and act as the voice of an alternative discourse in contrast to those voices who support over-exploitation (and at the same time under-estimation) of young people's working capacities.



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