



Policy Brief

How to improve outcomes for vulnerable young people by Reflexive Policy Making in Pécs





Introduction

This policy brief builds on the work of a pan-European Horizon 2020 research project on urban youth inequality called UPLIFT project. It addresses some of the key findings from local UPLIFT research in Pécs, which is based on interviews with several local policy experts working in the fields of education, employment and housing, as well as with 40 young people who face difficulties in gaining access to proper education, affordable housing and secure employment in their lives. The results of the case study findings can be found [here](#).

Many pieces of research prove that vulnerable social groups experience limited opportunities when making decisions about their educational, labour market or housing options. These decisions are strongly determined by many factors, such as ethnic background, family circumstances, the area where they live, or institutional bureaucracy, limiting the perceived opportunities for choice and restricting access to services available in the city and to good quality of life. This what we call path-dependency.

This policy brief intends to describe the underlying mechanisms that create and re-create pre-determined decisions of vulnerable young people in Pécs. It also makes recommendations about how the current financial, legal and institutional framework can be utilised more efficiently in creating better targeted mobility channels that break path-dependency by involving young people in policy-making and implementation.



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, are also co-designing a tool 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). Through the reflexive policy making agenda, UPLIFT's objective is a new, sustainable, participatory policy process, where young people are actively contributing to policies that directly influence their life chances.

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We believe that young people need to be involved in discussions about local policies and their implementation to break path-dependency identified as a phenomenon also visible in Pécs and to create a policy framework that suits better to their needs and foster social mobility. The experience of co-creation processes piloted in four cities (Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Sfântu Gheorghe and Tallinn) involving both local stakeholders and young people facing vulnerable situations within the UPLIFT project suggests that such involvement can be achieved with modest resource inputs, but can have a substantial impact on their lives and prospects, with positive effects on the local, in some cases on the national system too.

Path-dependency of young people in Pécs

Path-dependency is a social phenomenon that has been identified repeatedly and is manifested in many aspects of life, including the three domains covered by the UPLIFT project: education, employment and housing. Path-dependency means that the socio-economic and cultural background of individuals and the fairly rigid local institutional system (including schools, social services, employers) strongly determine the positions and life strategies of vulnerable young people. Path-dependency is perpetuated by all potential factors - individuals, families and institutions - among others, by insisting on the status quo. This clinging is not voluntary, but rather the result of inertia brought about by social constraints. As we have seen in Pécs, deviating from anchored attitudes and patterns of choice appears to be unattainable even if individual actors are aware of the dysfunctionality of the system and how it contributes to the reproduction of inequalities between social groups.

This is partly due to a lack of trust in welfare institutions, which originates from previous negative experiences. However, it is also rooted in the absence of transitional solutions (e.g. an institutional form between social housing and market rental), as big jumps make any deviation from the status quo too risky. This is compounded by the difficulty of untangling the interlinked systems of housing, education and employment without a coordinated effort. It also means that finding pathways into better housing, education and employment requires certain skills and agency of the individuals to be able to choose an inexperienced path that neither family nor institutions have shown them.

Path-dependency is the result of the interaction of macro-level structures and also meso- and micro-level factors. Structural factors such as the economic potential of a city, the segregated nature of the education system, shortage in the social housing and lack of opportunity for retraining, all create an environment in which actors have to live. At the same time, factors such as the behaviour of institutional actors (e.g. schools, workplaces, the municipality), family attitudes and material assets, and individual characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, habitus) also contribute to the creation of path-dependencies. This policy brief is intended to assist local decision making, therefore focuses on meso- and micro-level factors, namely those that can be implemented without requiring changes to the existing macro-structures.



1. Segregation and rigid educational pathways

Findings

Patterns of educational pathways clearly reflect the lack of social mobility of young people. Those who were born into families with low educational attainment and living in social housing or in segregated neighbourhoods and/or have attended primary school in segregated areas are ultimately more likely to have a low educational attainment. They are the ones who drop out early from secondary education, typically vocational education and training, and are excluded from various training and employment opportunities, which can substantially determine their labour market prospects in later life.



They [the school] did not even give us a chance. So, there was this paper, listing all the optional schools after the primary (...) They did not even give a chance to those who would like to choose differently to make their lives better. This was very hard for me.



Statement of a young woman with regard to a special educational institution

Main mechanisms

Educational outcomes are strongly influenced by family background. Parents with low educational attainment and in a difficult socio-economic position often lack many of the resources needed to support their child's development through education and into employment. It manifests in ways such as underestimating the importance of education due to their lack of experience, not being able to help with homework and learning, lack of knowledge of possible educational pathways. Sometimes, the living space is not suitable for learning and the family does not have the financial means to pay for the extra costs of help. In several cases, parents expect their children to start working as early as possible to have additional resources to finance the family, and thus hinder their children's education and their chances of obtaining a better and more stable employment position later.

The family environment has a striking influence on educational outcomes, and the educational system in Pécs has little potential to positively influence the future of students by overwriting these influences if necessary. The research in Pécs found that institutions were able to assist talented vulnerable young people through specific programmes (e.g. AJTP, after-school activities) in case the family support was available, but in the absence of this support, the institutions were simply not able to break path-dependency.



2. Stuck in inactivity among mothers and patterns of discrimination against Roma people

Findings

Path-dependency in the labour market is manifested, among other things, in discrimination against Roma workers, which over time becomes embedded in young people's strategies, notably by limiting themselves when considering potential jobs.



...there is a locksmith workshop, I had a phonecall with them.... I used proper wording about the profession, as it was expected. And they say ok, come in, you are hired. ... I go inside, saying good morning, I introduced myself. What do you want? I am, and I came to sign the needed documents, as we have spoken by phone and I was hired. Oh, I am sorry, there is no recruitment at all.



A Roma man having a vocational degree

There is also a path-dependency for women stuck in inactivity due to having children, i.e. mothers with children tend to remain inactive in the labour market, often for a longer period of time, even after their children are 3 years old.



There were cases when my mother tried to help me finding a half-time job, but the employers did not want to accept that. And still it is my problem that they [the employers] do not want to care for the problems of mothers with children, what would be the time they can spend on work.



A young mother having older than 3 years old children

Main mechanisms

Both during their educational careers and in the labour market, Roma people face discrimination, often associated with multidimensional disadvantages such as lower educational attainment or segregated housing. The research of UPLIFT in Pécs shows that the possibility of discrimination significantly decreases as the education level increases, which is associated with a wider network of contacts and a more inclusive working environment.

There are several factors behind the long-term economic inactivity of mothers both as push factors (lack of flexible labour market solutions for women who are lower educated, which makes it difficult for them to find and carry out flexible work with young children) and pull factors (still present paternalistic family patterns that are based on income differences between men and women and socio-cultural values, which assign women's responsibilities primarily to the family and the home).



3. Being stuck in the municipal housing system

Findings

In the housing domain, path-dependency is seen particularly in the municipal housing sector. It indicates that those who are born in families already living in municipal housing or who have lived in municipal housing at some point in their lives are more likely to stay in the sector. This can happen via parental legacy or in their own right for rent, contributing to a sustained demand for municipal housing, which limits the potential range and number of people entering the sector from outside.

Main mechanisms

The municipal housing system currently seems to function as a trap with informal barriers to both entry and exit. Interviews revealed that it is safe for people living in municipal housing to stay in place, even though housing contracts are mostly short-term, practice shows that they are regularly and automatically prolonged. Leaving the sector, renting on the market or buying property often seems impossible, even with the support available at local and national level. Even when it is not the case, i.e. when the household's income, assets and solvency are proper, there is no exit from the sector. This is partly due to the aforementioned insistence on the status quo among tenant families, partly to discrimination against Roma families and families with children in the market rental sector, and partly to the housing policy of the local authority.

Currently, in the absence of proper data on occupancy and the associated costs and revenues, ad hoc decisions regulate the municipal housing system, leading to externalities such as illegal sub-renting, unmonitored arrears, uncertain length of waiting lists, and non-transparent access to housing. Under these circumstances, stable tenants have a comparative advantage and municipal housing loses its temporary character.



My mother has a social unit, the one where we are living is also social, and my partner's parents also live a street away.



Young woman living in the eastern part of the city



How could path-dependency be tackled locally?

1. Prevention

+1 Involvement of parents

2. Institutional cooperation

3. Transitory solutions

What should be done in each policy area?

Education

1. Prevention

Today, segregation and socio-economic background are factors that predict with relatively high accuracy the negative outcomes of the educational path of young people. Early prevention, i.e. improving the socio-economic conditions of families, which are the primary socio-cultural environment of individuals, is essential to open up pathways to social mobility. This includes early support for families (like pre-school interventions) and regular and supportive connections with families.

2. Institutional cooperation

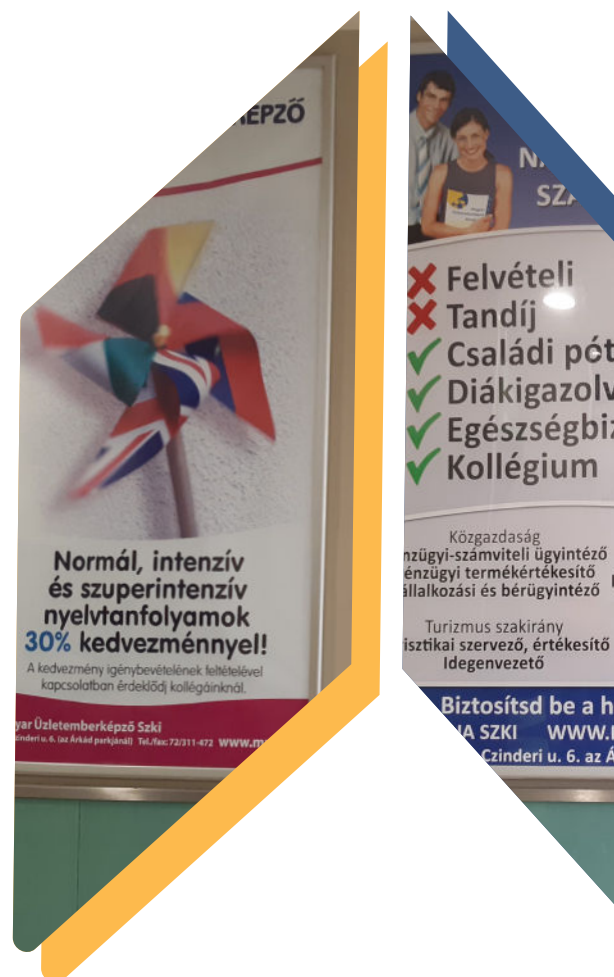
Educational actors should continuously cooperate to have visibility of opportunities to ensure accessibility, eligibility criteria and capacity. Greater visibility of the opportunities available to young people will help them to shape their own pathways according to their needs and abilities, and interventions to improve the circulation of information should include building the capacity of institutions in career guidance.

3. Transitory solution

There is little capacity for moving between forms of education offering a baccalaureate and those offering vocational training. The rigidity of educational pathways can be reduced by making transitions between classes more generally available, and by providing systemic as well as personalised assistance to help people return to the education system. Specific solutions can be developed by means of a co-creation process with those 16-year-olds for whom education is officially not obligatory anymore and who are close to dropping out of the education system or have already left education without qualifications.

4. Involvement of parents

Involvement of parents into school activities to strengthen communication between parents and institutions and provide insights into each other's life. The social institutional system alone is powerless if the parents are not partners in realising their child's future potential.



Employment

1. Prevention

In the operation of the Employment Office those activities are crucially missing, that would actively seek out and systematically engage vulnerable residents, who have not registered as jobseekers themselves. Such an engagement programme could contribute to ensuring that all those who need labour market support have access to appropriate assistance.

2. Institutional cooperation

Enlargement of the local Pact on employment to specifically identified target groups is needed to address the problems perceived on the labour market. It is proposed to involve primarily young mothers and local Roma people, who have been identified by the research as particularly vulnerable groups on the labour market in Pécs. We also propose to broaden the currently rather narrow set of implementers of the Pact to include vocational training institutions, representatives of employers and social service organisations.

3. Transitory solution

As with UPLIFT policy recommendations on education, we propose the provision of integrated services to improve pathways from schools into work, which is key to addressing local labour market problems.

Housing

1. Prevention

Early recognition of housing arrears problems, definition of exact eligibility criteria for help with arrears, and provision of social help might prevent people from being evicted. In addition, the cautious management of debts might also prevent non-payment to become a norm among certain tenant groups.


2. Institutional cooperation

Strengthening the relevance of the Housing Roundtable with the involvement of housing providers, social services and NGOs to work out a transparent local housing regulation system and through this spread the responsibility for changes.

3. Transitory solution

Setting up Social Rental Agencies that provide above-social but below-market rents to the public tenants coupled with social work by means of renting out privately owned flats with a public insurance. This idea was already piloted by the "Kiléptető" housing scheme but could be mainstreamed.





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.



UPLIFT participatory policy making in action

A local Youth Board collaborated with the Municipality, housing association De Key, resident organization !WOON 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).



Tallinn

Amsterdam

Sfantu Gheorghe

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.

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 Sfantu 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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