



Policy Brief

Co-creating a Reflexive Policy Agenda in education in Sfântu Gheorghe



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 the local UPLIFT research in Sfântu Gheorghe. It also sets out the study's implications for the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe, educational institutions on the local and county level, different types of stakeholder groups, vulnerable young people aged 16-25, and other organisations engaged in the local policy agenda in education. It is particularly concerned with access to quality education for vulnerable children.

The major structural problem of the Romanian education and welfare system is that it lacks a well-articulated vision - especially when it comes to the inclusion and retention of disadvantaged groups. This is exacerbated by the fact that public administration is highly centralised, with public institutions at all levels overly dependent on central decisions, which are not sufficiently sensitive to local problems and solutions. The decision-making process is top-down and hierarchical and based upon over-bureaucratization, characterized by "excessive controls performed rather in a punitive manner"¹. This dynamic results in the challenge that local policy makers don't usually have either the freedom or power (and the energy maybe) to initiate alternative, local approaches to systemic problems.

While the organising principle of education is to ensure equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their background, the institutional mechanisms actually increase segregation and exacerbate social inequalities, which is detectable as early as the end of elementary school. When comparing rural and urban areas, these differences become even greater and more conspicuous².

The major findings of the Uplift project in the field of education in Sfântu Gheorghe are similar in both institutional and young people's stakeholder groups.

Common to the perception of both groups was:

- the lack of safety in the educational system (from bullying to the unsatisfying relationships between the pupils and teachers);
- instability/insecurity (uncertainty of regulations expressed through unclear methodological guidelines as well as staff shortages);
- very strict and rigid frameworks the schools are confined to;
- the lack of room for creativity and flexibility in the teaching activity;
- the absence of a strong partnership between the parties directly involved (school, pupil, parents); and
- a shortage of qualified staff at all levels of education and a general sense of helplessness in the face of most unexpected situations.



While local policy makers have very limited means of influence on the national system of education, they have the power, together with the implementing actors (such as schools, NGOs, social service providers companies, training institutions etc.), to initiate local policies and actions targeting the reduction of social inequalities among children and improving access to quality education for all children. You can read more about the local challenges and opportunities in our [Urban Report](#) and about the experiences of people from marginalised communities in Sfântu Gheorghe in our [Case Study report](#).

In order to start to address this through reflexive policy practice, young people need support to shape their experiences and needs into coherent and sustainable insights and ideas for change. Similarly, institutional actors need support to grasp how the involvement of their primary target group (a reflexive/participatory policy-making process) can help shape local policy and practice.

The following findings and policy suggestions are based on engagement with institutions, NGOs, social service providers, representatives of governmental institutions at county and local level, researchers, representatives of the Employment Agency and vulnerable youngsters aged 16-25.

The brief concludes with case studies exemplifying the participatory process towards policy making in a context where neither policy making, nor participatory processes have strong precedents.

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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Key findings in Sfântu Gheorghe

Gathering valid and trustworthy data is a great challenge³. Even where national data collection mechanisms do exist in education, the data produced is not suitable for tracking school participation, drop-outs or non-enrolment of different social groups. Data is not collected at the municipal level and data at the county level does not provide sufficient information on existing trends, particularly with regard to access to education for disadvantaged groups. The lack of accessible information from within the education system that enables disaggregated and sensitive data for monitoring, means that local authorities and institutions do not have reliable knowledge on which to base local policy development.

In Romania, on the local level, public institutions have little or no power to make strategic decisions regarding policies. A highly centralized state has at least two major consequences in the long term: local policy makers become the enforcers of national policies which inhibit creative thinking or implement new approaches. This results in a blanket lack of engagement, and a sense of helplessness and incapability, even in cases where the law allows for changes to be made at the local level.

The education system of the country enhances segregation and marginalization in spite of a law specifically barring segregation in schools. Inequalities start at enrolment. Although school zoning was precisely designed to prevent the emergence of elite or 'poor' schools, housing inequality automatically leads to educational inequality in this case. Schools are evaluated upon a single criterion: the pupils' academic results achieved at the two major, turning-point exams at the end of middle school or the eighth grade (14 years of age) and at the end of high school or the twelfth grade (18 years of age). This type of evaluation leads to several other practices, such as teachers preparing pupils in the 8th and 12th grades only for final national exams exclusively in detriment to the other subjects⁴. Parents also unofficially report about teachers refusing to pass academically weaker pupils during the last year, so as to avoid negatively influencing the school's average score and competitive edge. This effectively disqualifies these students from participation.

Furthermore, in Sfântu Gheorghe there is commonly held perception about so-called 'good schools' and 'bad schools'. Most children of low socio-economic background are clustered in the 'bad schools'⁵. On the one hand, the pupils' chances of breaking the vicious cycle and transferring to one of the more prestigious schools decrease dramatically, while, on the other hand, often the leading schools refer difficult pupils or bad performers to other struggling schools, where dropping out of school is a significant risk. According to the results of the co-creation process and workshops (27 meetings) held with the young stakeholders' group, attending a 'bad school' feels like a stigma in many cases both for the students and the teachers.

Young people aspire to greater opportunities than they are offered. Without substantial financial, emotional and moral support from their parents, most children wouldn't be able to face the requirements of the school. In the absence of this type of encouragement, the support provided by the school is considered crucial, otherwise their chances to access quality education decreases with each year spent in school. Most of the young people become aware of the differences between themselves and more privileged peers and by the age of 15-16 they refuse to interact with adolescents of different backgrounds for fear of inadequacy. Many of the young people participating in the co-creation process consider this situation painfully unjust.



Schools are overburdened with administrative tasks and with the requirements of the curriculum. At the same time, there is a lack of educational experts, mentoring, accessible social services and educational aid.

Common to the perception of both groups was:

- The very strict and rigid frameworks they are confined to;
- The lack of room for creativity and flexibility in the teaching activity;
- Instability/insecurity of the educational system in the terms of uncertainty of regulations expressed through unclear methodological guidelines as well as staff shortage. Between the fall of the communist regime in December 1989 and February 2023, there have been 32 ministers of education in Romania, many of them being in office no longer than 3-6 months. Between 2011 and 2020 the National Educational Law has been modified 114 times;
- The absence of a strong partnership between the parties directly involved (school, pupil, parents);
- The vast shortage of qualified staff on all levels of education and a general sense of helplessness in the face of most unexpected situations. In the context of the national educational system, "unexpected situation" may mean almost anything which deviates from what is considered to be normal or ordinary. There is a law forbidding children to be "placed in special education based on criteria such as: race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion or because of belonging to a vulnerable group". In spite of the fact that there are approaches for dealing with situations like dysgraphia, dyslexia, behaviour disorders, violence in the family or neglect, for example, most of the schools either lack the qualified and prepared staff to follow these, or simply don't know about them.
- The lack of safety in the educational system for young people. The teacher-pupil relationship is perceived as a predominantly one-sided relationship where the main objective is to transfer the necessary amount of information/knowledge regardless of the pupils' needs (like: dyslexia, dysgraphia, background of domestic violence etc.).

The Romanian labour market both at national and at local level has an inherent contradiction. While employers express labour shortage concerns, job seekers lament the hardships of finding employment. Statistical data show that the unemployment rate is relatively low in the city but the working poverty rate is quite high. This situation primarily affects young people aged 18-24, generating a 11.4% unemployment rate among them. The results of our research establish a clear connection between educational attainment and the prospects of later employment for a person. On the one hand, without eight grades of compulsory minimum education, finding employment is virtually impossible. On the other hand, the education offered in the vocational schools doesn't adequately prepare pupils for immediate employment. Families with the lowest income (especially the beneficiaries of social welfare) are most likely to engage in undeclared work in agriculture, the cleaning industry or construction as day labourers.

Housing prospects and housing-related problems represent the youngsters' greatest fear for the future. The lack of affordable or public housing units, either as a social housing or subsidised housing scheme, leaves young people vulnerable to unrealistically high real estate prices established on the free market. In order to deal with the lack of affordable housing, two or three generations live in the same apartment. Research from 2018 shows that 40% of the youngsters live with their parents and their prospects of becoming homeowners are very low⁶.

In 2018, Romania had the highest rate of risk of poverty in Europe (including non-EU countries). Although the statistics at a national level are gloomy and, in general, the Romanian public opinion considers that ‘too much money goes to social benefits’, only about 15% of Romania’s GDP is spent on social protection (2018)⁷. In the same year, the EU average was 27% (Eurostat). There are no official statistics regarding poverty rate in Sfântu Gheorghe. Public opinion continues to regard the precarious situation of the poor as their own fault and social inequality is escalating. From a statistical point of view, Romania has a minimal middle class with most of the population having lower standards of living. In Sfântu Gheorghe, the system of social services is more varied and more efficiently organised than the national average mostly due to the local authority’s openness towards collaborating with NGOs that are subcontracted for the task of poverty reduction⁸.

Our research, alongside with the co-creation process identified several priority policy areas for young people, including:

- **Initiating a city-level rehabilitation programme with the aim of reducing infrastructural differences between schools.** Although all stakeholders involved in the implementation (e.g. project partners Suppedito and Sepsi LAG, the institutional stakeholders group, and young stakeholders group) are convinced that real change will be enacted when a unified minimum quality (regarding quality of education, infrastructure and organisation of teaching) is ensured inside the schools, we also believe that it is an absolute necessity to provide equal technical resources for all children in the primary and elementary schools. In this fashion, children would benefit from similar conditions and preparation for the milestone exam at the end of middle school which determines the institution they will continue to attend.
- **Supporting teachers and schools to provide quality education.** Relevant and insightful training programmes, mentorship and scholarship programmes must be created based upon the real needs of pupils and teachers in the local education system, especially in the area of conflict management, group dynamics of inclusion, and bullying. Research must be conducted to gather valid data about the reality and the perception of the local education system in order to find the most adequate solutions for the needs of the beneficiaries (educators and children). Another possibility is to strengthen the school’s collaboration with NGOs in order to have alternative human resources that could be engaged in the less regulated activities of after-school programmes.
- **Supporting participatory management processes in schools by involving the pupils into decision making.** Young people, by the age of 13-14, already have a clear understanding about their schools’ organisation and functioning and are capable of bringing ideas to create a more supportive and creative environment for learning. It is important to create a supportive and democratic environment in schools which enhances participatory decision-making processes in those areas where the schools have the power to propose local actions for implementing national policies. Such an initiative would pave the way to a mutually beneficial development in the long term.
- **Investing in building a strong student community** through social and cultural events and other bonding possibilities. Strong peer-to-peer relationships are vital especially in the teenage years and greatly contribute to successful school attendance⁹. These activities could be initiated by the schools themselves, and NGO support can be involved as well.
- **Changing the public discourse about the quality of schools.** A communication campaign should be initiated about the qualities of each school in the city without mentioning the academic results achieved at the two major exams, in order to emphasise that good quality education includes other considerations besides academic attainment. Debates must be organised in order to deconstruct the general convictions about ‘good schools’ and ‘bad schools’ which will contribute in the long term to the desegregation of education in Sfântu Gheorghe.

Collaborative formation of other local policies

No strategy can be designed in a vacuum, ignoring the many ways in which different policies and environments influence young people. Therefore, development plans regarding education, youth, culture, sports, housing, labour force should all be equipped to take into consideration the future visions of today's young people.

Young people's voice must be strengthened in Sfântu Gheorghe and there is a real, pressing need to encourage and enable young people to stand up for their needs, as well as to assist institutions to take them seriously. The co-creation process in Sfântu Gheorghe showed that these two groups rarely co-operate and a culture of co-operation and engagement needs to be established and sustained.

The Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe has made tangible shifts towards breaking this cycle but listening to and involving young people needs to transcend projects and it should be extended to policy making. This will benefit the entire community of Sfântu Gheorghe in the long term.



Recommendations

- **Developing an affordable after-school program** that fits with parents' schedules, in order to increase school achievements. Schools should engage with parents when designing any intervention to understand their most urgent needs and ascertain their financial capabilities. The program should take place on the school grounds and include lunch and tackling homework because in many families help with homework is very difficult to obtain¹⁰. The municipality could offer financial support for after-school programs, focusing on the schools with the most disadvantaged students.
- **Setting up structures of assistance for pupils in schools.** As the Youth Board repeatedly expressed based on its informal research conducted among 80 peers city-wide, one of their most urgent problems was the lack of support in dealing with issues adjacent/contextual to teaching and learning (bullying among peers, abuse of power, injustice, psychological counselling, learning difficulties, etc.). This was identified at all levels (teachers, youngsters and parents). A stronger cooperation between schools, parents and social service providers is needed to start addressing this major problem the youngsters experience on a daily basis. Possible solutions could involve closer collaboration with specialised NGOs in the field of addiction and violence, practical instruction programs for teachers and staff on how to handle and where to report such cases, training programs for head teacher skills, or the effective organisation of PTA meetings, for example.
- **Creating a city-wide volunteering program** in the community focusing on the schools that take a central role in building relationships with vulnerable populations (e.g. mentoring by older children in a buddy system, cleaning and maintaining the school grounds, accompanying children in field-trips, etc.). This would strengthen networking capacities and could potentially lead to better mutual understanding as well as relieve some of the burden on teachers and schools.
- **Stimulating the creation of a strong network for NGOs interested in educational development.** The civil society sector of Sfântu Gheorghe offers slightly more varied services than the national average. NGOs have an enormous role in Romania and in Sfântu Gheorghe as well, developing and furnishing services that are not covered by the state. In this regard, there is an accentuated need for a strong civil society that can balance the deficiencies of the state and of its institutions. NGOs can take over tasks like family support to help keep children in education, after school programmes for children who don't get enough support from their families, social assistance, and organising different youth-empowering activities etc.



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.



Participatory policy making in action: Sfântu Gheorghe

Romania is among the countries with the highest level of early school drop out in the EU. Even though education is compulsory until the age of 16, about one-fifth of the student population has dropped out by the age of 16¹¹. Studies show that selection based on ability, at the end of lower secondary education and the perceived poor quality and relevance of the upper secondary vocational training education together with the limited access to the tertiary education are the main factors responsible for the precipitous school drop-out at this particular age¹². In 2015, nearly one-fifth of Romanian young adults (15-24 years old) were not in education, employment or training, one of the highest rates among EU countries. Among 15-34 years old, those who did not attain upper secondary education were more likely to be unemployed, with a 13.5% unemployment rate compared to 7% for those who attained tertiary education¹³. Income inequality in Romania is the highest in Europe¹⁴.

Although national legislation and policies create a positive framework, local initiatives are missing/failed to create a coherent, sustainable local policy agenda for implementing national policies and responding to local problems.

The main objective of the UPLIFT co-creation was to create a policy framework which facilitates better access to education for vulnerable youth and contributes to reducing school abandonment and increasing employability. Thus, the project intended to carry out a co-creation process of education policies that enable disadvantaged youth to enter and stay in mainstream education; that improve educational outcomes, including in remedial education (Second Chance); and that integrate support services with mainstream and alternative educational services.

The project also created the context for acknowledging the fact that young people, including those with vulnerable backgrounds, should have a decisive role in identifying structural causes that maintain social inequalities and finding tailored solutions to the problems they face in their educational pathway. Thus, the project aims to contribute to the empowerment of young people with vulnerable backgrounds, and the valuing and legitimisation of their social contribution. It is generally acknowledged that participatory design enhances engagement and contributes to ensuring implementation success.




The development of the **Reflexive Policy Agenda in Sfântu Gheorghe** was a two-year long process, which offered a general overview for the participants about the benefits of a co-creation process, which was important as the approach had not been tried in the municipality before.

The milestones of this “experiment” in the Sfântu Gheorghe implementation site were the following:

- Setting up an institutional stakeholders’ group mostly based upon the existing network of the Sepsi LAG implementation partner in the field of education. The group consists of representatives of institutions from the educational system (schools, county level School Inspectorate, Centre for Educational Resources), representatives of public social service providers (county level Child Protection Service, local Directorate of Social Services), representatives of the county level Agency for Labor Force, representatives of NGOs providing social services, and the Vice-Mayor of the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe.
- Setting up a youth stakeholders’ group mostly based upon the recommendations of gatekeeper NGOs and some schools from the city. As the exact nature of vulnerability was deliberately not predefined, the recruitment of vulnerable youngsters depended on the recruiting organisations’ decision.
- Organising group meetings. Both groups had external facilitators from the outside leading the group meetings. The nature of the groups required different approaches and different working rhythms; as a consequence, the young people’s group had 27 meetings, the institutional group had 7 meetings and there were 4 joint meetings organised with the participation of both groups.
- Identifying factors in both groups and from both perspectives that hinder the access to quality education of vulnerable children as well as the factors that lead to early school drop out in the municipality. The maps of the identified problems were created based upon a cause and consequence relationship.
- Organising 4 joint meetings between the groups in order to reconcile the differences between the two sets of problem maps and designing proposals in order to address those problems which can or should be dealt with on a local level. Problems that regard national educational policy and regulations were identified but solutions to them make no part of the Reflexive Policy Agenda.

As a result, a Reflexive Policy Agenda was developed. The main objective of the Sfântu Gheorghe Reflexive Policy Agenda is to enhance the access of vulnerable children and young people to quality education. This objective is based upon two parallel sets of actions: first, reducing the differences between schools (at any level) in the city and second, assuring that all children from Sfântu Gheorghe are enrolled and kept in the educational system until at least 10th grade. This objective is a long-term vision. The Sfântu Gheorghe Reflexive Policy Agenda outlines the framework of this long-term vision by formulating a set of priorities and concrete actions that can represent the foundation of this vision:

- **Priority 1:** Development of auxiliary school infrastructure: dormitories, cafeteria, transportation.
 - **Priority 2:** Strengthening the triangle of cooperation: school-parent-pupil.
 - **Priority 3:** Getting the schools ready for handling violence in school.
 - **Priority 4:** Assuring aiding personal in education (supporting teacher, school mediators, developing teachers, speech therapists, school counsellors).
 - **Priority 5:** Creating a supporting environment in all schools.
 - **Priority 6:** Enhancing inter-institutional cooperation/networking.
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Examples from across Europe

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.



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.

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

Policy Brief

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Partners



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Endnotes

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