



Policy Paper on Youth Autonomy

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Youth Autonomy and the European Commission White Paper on Youth

Youth autonomy emerged as an issue of major importance during the consultations of young people linked to the preparation of the European Commission's White Paper *A New Impetus for European Youth* and the European Youth Forum's policy papers on education and employment. Young people felt that there were many factors which inhibited their ability to become autonomous, such as 'policies on employment, social protection and labour market integration, but also housing and transport policies.' The White Paper therefore concluded that 'given the major importance of autonomy for young people, a finding that emerges from the consultation exercise, the European Commission proposes setting up a high-level working group to advise it and the Council of Ministers, in its various configurations, on this matter. Autonomy for young people is in the end beneficial for society as a whole, and it is a complex problem which requires multidisciplinary expertise, and the solutions require the involvement of many policies other than youth policies (employment, family, social protection, health, transport, justice and home affairs).'¹

From the discussions with young people in Gent and Murcia it became clear that young people understand youth autonomy as being primarily related to financial independence as well as the right to make choices of their own. The discussions also indicated how complex an issue youth autonomy is and how it touches upon policies such as education, family, employment, entrepreneurship, social protection, health, housing, transport and mobility, justice and home affairs, discrimination and social integration.

At the end of October 2003, the European Commission held a seminar on the 'Autonomy of Young People'. The objective of this seminar was to take the discussion on autonomy forwards with a view to developing some concrete suggestions which the Commission could draw on in preparing a proposal in the field to follow-up on the White Paper. The seminar included three working groups: one on education, one on employment and one on social protection and housing. The report of this seminar and the conclusions from it were presented to the Youth Ministers and Director Generals responsible for Youth during their meeting in Ireland at the beginning of March 2004. Here the European Commission was given a mandate to develop an action plan on the theme of autonomy to be presented at the next meeting of the Director Generals in Ireland on 2-3 June 2004.

Young People and Autonomy

There is considerable evidence to indicate that young people are becoming autonomous at a later date than in the past. Young people are spending longer in education, with more participating in higher education. In 1985, a fifteen

year-old could expect to be in education for a further 5.3 years, but by 1996 that figure had risen to 6.7 years. Similarly, in the 1990s the youngest age at which 50% of young people were not living with their parents increased and the average age at marriage and at the birth of the first child was older. In countries with high youth unemployment levels, the

¹ European Commission, White Paper *A New Impetus for European Youth*, p.28. age at which young people leave home tends to be older. Other factors such as the rising costs of accommodation, the reduction in access to social protection benefits and the problems encountered by young people in finding a secure footing in the employment market have also contributed to the difficulties encountered by young people in becoming autonomous. Therefore, measures to improve young people's opportunities to become autonomous earlier can contribute to young people taking a more active role in society and thereby helping to counteract some of the demographic problems linked to the ageing of the population.

Definition of autonomy

There is currently no consensus on the meaning or definition of 'autonomy' from the youth perspective. There is frequently a confusion between the use of independence - which relates primarily to financial factors - and autonomy, which is a broader concept encompassing also the ability of a person to shape his or her own life. In the follow-up to the White Paper there has been a discussion on the definition and use of the term. The Commission has used a definition based on 'a reasonable life without excessive dependency' and in the seminar organised by the Commission there was agreement that autonomy consists of economic, social and democratic aspects and that the participation of young people in society is important for autonomy, as it allows young people to express themselves and to take their responsibility as citizens. The working group on autonomy at the Murcia Youth Gathering developed one of the most comprehensive working definitions:

Autonomy is the situation where young people have the necessary support, resources and opportunities to chose to live independently, to run their own lives and to have full social and political participation in all sectors of everyday life, and be able to take independent decisions.

However, as young people are not a cohesive group and all live different realities and have different needs it is difficult to develop a concise and all-encompassing definition of what autonomy is for young people. For example, the situation of young women with regard to autonomy can be strongly affected by their cultural reality and young people with fewer opportunities can face specific challenges that must be taken into consideration. Thus, in this paper it is proposed to focus on a series of tools that can make youth

autonomy a reality by giving young people the opportunities to make the choices that will allow them to be more autonomous and less dependent on family and state.

Tools to become more autonomous

There are number of factors that are closely linked to youth autonomy. The young people involved in the consultation for the European Commission's White paper identified income, employment, social protection, labour market integration, housing and transport as policy areas which all have an impact on youth autonomy. At the seminar organised by the European Commission the three working groups focused on education, employment and social protection and housing.

Close links can be drawn between education and youth autonomy. A good quality education and the acquisition of a variety of skills help to ensure that a young person can find employment and earn an income which allows them to be economically self-sufficient. At the same time though, young people are spending longer in education and are less likely than in the past to have either financial support in the form of grants or other support such as subsidised housing and transport which will allow them to be autonomous. Citizenship education is especially important in that it encourages young people to exercise their rights and participate actively in society.

In terms of employment, young people in many regions and countries face considerable problems in finding a secure position in the labour market due to high youth unemployment levels. Moreover, high numbers of young people figure among the working poor and some groups of young people such as the disabled or those from ethnic minorities face considerable discrimination in the labour market.

The problems of unemployment and lack of financial support for students in some countries are exacerbated by changes in social protection provision for young people over the last two decades. In most countries there has been a systematic reduction in the value of benefits in real terms as well as increasing restrictions on the conditions for receiving them. Young people often have inadequate social security coverage as they have not worked previously and also face restrictions on access to other benefits such as housing benefit. Thus, young people often remain dependent on their families both in terms of income transfers and in-kind support.

Other policy areas such as housing and transport can also limit the opportunities of young people to be independent. This is particularly the case in relation to the high cost of housing, especially in capital and major cities, where young people have been priced out of the market. Similarly, high transport costs restricting young people's opportunities, particularly in rural

areas.

Autonomy and the Open Method of Coordination The Open Method of Coordination in the youth policy field was set in place at the end of 2003 with the agreement of common objectives in the field of participation and information by the Council in a Resolution and common objectives for voluntary service and a greater understanding of youth should be put in place by the end of 2004. The issue of Autonomy is very closely linked to the horizontal policy areas identified in the European Commission's White Paper (education, lifelong learning and mobility, employment, social integration and anti-racism). Indeed, autonomy could be a key way to ensure that youth are taken into account more in other policy areas. The European Commission has planned to develop an 'action plan' for autonomy, taking into account some of the conclusions reached in the seminar in 2004.

European Youth Forum proposals to promote autonomy among young people

The European Youth Forum believes that ability to be autonomous is a right of young people and that the increased autonomy of young people would also encourage them to be more active citizens. In terms of youth policy, autonomy should be closely linked to the Open Method of Coordination process, but more particularly to the commitment made by the European Commission and endorsed by the Council of Ministers to take more account of youth in other policy areas.

Many of the European Youth Forum's existing policy and position papers include proposals and demands which would help to promote greater autonomy among young people. Therefore, in this paper the European Youth Forum highlights the following key demands as being central to promoting autonomy.

Defining autonomy and implementing policies to promote youth autonomy

- Specific public policies adapted to the needs of young people are required to allow them to make their own life choices in the fields of education, training, employment, participation and active citizenship.
- A definition of the term autonomy drawing on the one used by the working group on autonomy at the Murcia youth gathering should be developed, taking into account the importance of citizenship to the issue. A common definition would help to develop a common understanding of the term in the European context.

Gearing policies to promote youth autonomy

- The linkage of the European Commission's proposal for an autonomy

action plan to the proposal to take more account of youth in other policy areas contained in the White Paper. By considering the youth aspect of **horizontal issues** such as education, employment, social protection, housing and transport, the autonomy of young people could be promoted.

- In the field of **education**, a key need is to provide free access to education at all levels, in addition to grants to cover living costs so that young people can become autonomous at an earlier age and to promote equal access to education for all. Citizenship education should be introduced in a comprehensive manner to promote active citizenship and provide young people with the skills that enable them to make choices and take decisions and responsibility for their own lives.
- More specific **employment** policies for young people need to be introduced to tackle youth unemployment, poor working conditions and low incomes among the young. In the European Union a commitment to raising employment levels as part of the European Employment Strategy and supporting youth entrepreneurship would be central to achieving this and promoting labour market integration. The introduction of minimum living wages for young people and more secure employment conditions are also crucial to ensure that they can become autonomous.
- The development of a secure **social protection** safety net for young people. This would give young people a right to social security benefits and allow them to be autonomous even if they are unemployed. It would also provide support in the often precarious transition from education to employment.
- Improved provision of subsidised **housing and transport** for young people to facilitate their autonomy and independence. Specific measures adapted for young people are necessary here to enable them to live autonomously, for example designated low-cost or subsidised housing for young people and a wider access to reduced transport costs for students or other young people on low incomes.
- More mobility will allow young people to pursue their opportunities without geographical bounds. To make it easier for young people to move their address, in legal and housing terms, is to widen their opportunities.
- In order to give young people the chance to use their rights and opportunities, information about how they can use the different tools to be more autonomous should be actively disseminated in line with the Common Objectives on information to young people within the Open Method of Co-ordination.

- The European Youth Forum calls on the Directorate General for Education and Culture to develop its Autonomy Action Plan in conjunction with other Directorates General in the European Commission working on the horizontal issues mentioned above. Similarly, the Youth Working Party should work together with other Council formations.