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Executive Summary

This report presents the main findings of our analyses of the European Union's policy initiatives in the field of youth unemployment. It is based on a study of documents – including resolutions, policy initiatives, and statements – and interviews with policy actors at the European and national levels. The main findings can be summarised briefly as follows:

- ❖ ***Considerable progress has been made in identifying youth unemployment as an important policy target.*** One decade ago, youth unemployment was not on the agenda of EU institutions. The first initiatives were issued in 2005 (for example, European Youth Pact). In reaction to the economic crisis in 2008 and the subsequent increase in youth unemployment rates, the European Commission, Parliament, and Council of Ministers committed to tackle this problem. During the review of the Lisbon Strategy and the follow-up EU 2020 Strategy, policy initiatives related to youth have been fully incorporated into the European strategies for employment, the Social Inclusion Strategy, and the Education and Training 2010 work programme.
- ❖ ***EU initiatives have developed a proactive approach to education and employment, yet they need to be developed in relation to job and social security.*** The Lisbon 2020's initiatives on youth and employment (i.e., Youth on the Move and New Skills for New Jobs) are committed to facilitating the transition from education to work by improving qualifications and skills, and by accelerating access into the labour market. They promote a more proactive approach by identifying tangible recommendations (e.g., the Youth Guarantee). The problems of precarious jobs and segmented labour markets of limited entitlement and coverage by social security systems are mentioned in general terms but need to be developed in order to generate a more balanced, comprehensive policy strategy.
- ❖ ***Several processes of European policy coordination have been launched, yet they do not address employment and youth in an integrated manner.*** The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) has been firmly established as a means of policy coordination and development in the field of employment, youth, and social inclusion. However, the youth OMC does not focus explicitly on employment, and the employment OMC has no specific policies related to youth. An integrated European policy approach is needed to address both unemployment and youth in a coordinated way – without neglecting jobs and social security.
- ❖ ***European policy coordination is well accepted, yet its effectiveness needs to be improved.*** Policy actors converge in their observation that EU policies in the field of youth unemployment have little impact at the national level; they are badly implemented by national governments. This is because the EU lacks competencies in this policy field, thus relying on voluntary processes of policy coordination amongst member states. As long as competencies are not shifted to the EU level, the OMC needs to be applied more consistently and rigorously. In fact, while policy actors laud the OMC's strengths in the area of information exchange and agenda-setting, peer learning is not exploited thoroughly as a means of policy improvement and coordination. National

governments do not examine each other's policies or practices in depth, and there are few incentives or sanctions to increase learning. A more rigorous and critical process of monitoring, learning, and mutual surveillance should be developed.

- ❖ ***Conflicts of interest hinder the formulation and implementation of a comprehensive European policy on youth unemployment.*** Progress has been made in identifying youth unemployment as an important policy issue and defining overarching objectives and policy areas. However, conflicts of interest obstruct further development of a comprehensive strategy on youth unemployment with a tangible course of action. These conflicts are apparent amongst member states and are due to apparent differences in educational systems, labour markets, social security programmes, and financial capabilities. Further, the social partners – employers and trade unions – and social NGOs disagree about the necessity to develop youth-specific unemployment policies. More incentives and deliberations should be advanced to overcome this situation.

- ❖ ***Civil society organisations are part of issue-specific consultations and deliberations, yet they need to be involved in a generalised, structured manner.*** Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in representing and servicing young and disadvantaged people. Moreover, they provide valuable knowledge about the social reality at the local level. European CSOs are consulted by EU institutions in many areas of policymaking and have been formally included in the 'structured dialogue' on youth since 2007. However, their involvement in the field of unemployment policies and measures is rather limited. CSOs should be proactively included in this issue to tap into their knowledge, experiences, and contacts, thereby exploiting the potentials of policy learning within the OMC more intensely. Moreover, a structured 'civil dialogue' across policy areas should be established in order to promote cross-sectoral policy deliberations.

1 Introduction

The evolution of a European layer of employment policies – especially via the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) launched at the end of the 1990s – has raised analytical questions about the overall role of European institutions in setting an agenda and formulating and adopting innovative policies to help member states better address common societal challenges.¹ Among these challenges, one of the most striking has been the overall diffusion of high youth unemployment rates throughout Europe since the early 1980s. This report gives an overview of the development of youth policies at the EU level and illustrates the process of implementation. It concentrates on measures and initiatives related to youth (un)employment as outlined in the European employment initiatives and guidelines. The focus lies on the period from 1997 – when the first employment guidelines were established – to the current European Strategy 2020. The purpose of the following analyses is to highlight the progress made in the field of youth policies and describe their role within the Lisbon Strategy and the follow-up Strategy Europe 2020. For this purpose, several questions will be answered: Is youth unemployment considered a specific problem awaiting targeted policy measures, and how is it defined? Which are the specific objectives, instruments and measures adopted? To which extent does the European Employment Strategy promote youth policies at the national level? What role do civil society organisations play within the process?

The report is the product of the YOUNEX-project's fifth work package. Its research strategy was aimed at monitoring relevant EU policy developments over the past 20 years and assessing these EU policy initiatives. The work package gathered empirical data from various sources; in particular, we conducted preliminary talks with experts at the EU and national levels; we retrieved and analysed important policy documents – policy initiatives, reports, written interventions, and so on – and, finally, we conducted a number of interviews between August 2010 and June 2011 with members of different institutions – amongst them, national governments, the European Commission and Parliament, NGOs, and social partners (see Appendix). The empirical work of WP5 was done mainly by the responsible partner (University of Siegen), yet all national partners participated actively in the process by conducting interviews with national stakeholders and providing feedback to our analyses. An informal task force consisted of members from the Italian, German, and Swiss national teams.

1. See, for instance, Caroline de la Porte, Philippe Pochet, and Graham Room, "Social Benchmarking, Policy Making and New Governance in the EU," *Journal of European Social Policy* 11, no. 4 (2001): 291–307.; Jonathan Zeitlin and Philippe Pochet, eds, *The Open Method of Coordination in Action: The European Employment and Social Inclusion Strategies* (Brussels: Lang, 2005); Martin Heidenreich and Gabriele Bischoff "The Open Method of Coordination. A Way to the Europeanization of Social and Employment Policies?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46, no. 3 (2008): 497–532.

2 Development of Youth Policies within the Framework of the Lisbon Process

In the last decade, European Union institutions focused more explicitly on youth employment and social inclusion policy, identifying this field of action as a high priority within the European Employment Strategy (EES). Since 2002, the European Commission has developed a number of activities in youth policy fields. Further, an open method of coordination was applied to the youth area by the European Institutions to focus more on the youth dimension when developing major social policies.² In 2005, the Commission pointed out the need to support young people within the Lisbon process for more growth and better jobs, particularly in relation to young people's access to the labour market.³ As a consequence, the European Youth Pact was adopted by the European Council in 2005. It was meant to provide a political instrument to improve the effects of the revised Lisbon Strategy within the field of youth policies. The member states were encouraged to improve education, training, and social inclusion within the framework of the European Employment Strategy and the Social Inclusion Strategy.⁴ These initiatives were intensified because of the economic crisis of 2008 and the high unemployment rates amongst young people; the Commission and the Council of the European Union called for stronger policy action on both the European and national levels. While active citizenship, social inclusion, and solidarity of young people had already been objectives of the European cooperation⁵ within various policy areas, the aspects of education, employment, and social inclusion are becoming more important. Since the crisis, the Commission has published various communications to foster a better integration of young people into the labour market.

In the following chapters, we aim to give an overview of youth policies at the EU level, focusing on various policy measures for young people developed within the EES.

2.1 First steps towards a European policy regarding youth employment

Since the first years of the EES (1997–2000), employment guidelines have proposed tackling youth unemployment and preventing long-term unemployment. However, young people were considered part of the general group of unemployed people and not seen as a separate group whose problems await specific solutions. In fact, the employment guidelines put forward to develop preventive and

2. [Official Journal C 168 of 13.7.2002]. European Council. Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field.

3. [COM(2005) 206]. European Commission. Commission Communication of 30 May 2005 on European policies concerning youth: Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe – implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship.

4. [Council (2005) C 292/03]. Council of the European Union. Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on addressing the concerns of young people in Europe – implementing the European Pact for Youth and promoting active citizenship.

5. Framework of European cooperation in the youth field is based on principals of the OMC, which is used to establish common objectives for the four priorities of the White Paper on Youth: “participation”, “information”, “voluntary activities”, and “a greater understanding and knowledge of youth”. It is directed by the European Commission's Education and Culture Directorate-General.

employability-oriented strategies refer to both groups (young and adult long-term unemployment). The only difference is that the EU documents embrace the idea of an age-specific inclusion measure guarantee, arguing that public authorities should offer every unemployed young person a new chance to access the labour market before reaching six months' unemployment and unemployed adults within twelve months. Further, in the area of youth unemployment, the EES tends to prioritise initiatives that prevent young unemployed from becoming long-term unemployed by setting up activation measures in form of training, retraining, and work experience. The focus is primarily on equipping people with basic skills relevant to the labour market. Only after the White Paper on Youth was adopted in 2001⁶ – and only after the establishment of the first framework for European co-operation in youth policy by the Council in 2002⁷ – were member states encouraged to establish laws, strategies, and action plans regarding youth on the European and national levels. The Commission proposed a general approach that set a focus on participation, information, voluntary activities, and a greater understanding and knowledge of youth. It was the first impulse for better incorporation of the youth factor into sectoral policies.

Subsequently, between 2001 and 2003, the Council decided to update the employment guidelines by developing:

[...] comprehensive and coherent strategies for Lifelong Learning, in order to help people acquire and update the skills needed to cope with economic and social changes throughout the entire life cycle.[...] Such strategies should articulate the shared responsibility of public authorities, enterprises, the social partners and individuals, with relevant contribution from civil society, to contribute to the realisation of a knowledge-based society.⁸

Active and preventative measures for unemployed were specified, not only to offer stopgap measures but also ensure that all jobseekers benefit from services such as advice, guidance, and job-search assistance.

In 2005, the general demographic change, rising numbers of early school leavers, and high unemployment among young people became more important. The Commission released the Green Paper,⁹ which drew attention to the implications of these changes for Europe with particular emphasis on young people. Moreover, the Commission evaluated the Lisbon strategy after five years and pointed out the disappointing outcomes, particularly with regard to employment and slowed job

6. [COM(2001) 681 final]. European Commission. White Paper on a new impetus for European youth. It suggests a new framework of European cooperation in the youth field, comprising two strands: firstly, the application of the open method of coordination and, secondly, taking greater account of the 'youth' dimension in other policies. This resolution follows this White Paper by setting the priorities and the timetable for the European Union's (EU) work up until 2004 in the field of 'youth'.

7. [Official Journal C 168]. European Council.

8. [Council 2001/63/EC]. European Council. Council Decision of 19 January 2001 on Guidelines for Member States employment policies for the year 2001.

9. [COM(2005) 94]. European Commission. Communication from the Commission. Green Paper "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations".

creation.¹⁰ As a consequence of these findings, the Commission proposed a simplified coordination procedure and greater emphasis on the National Reform Plans (NRP) to give the strategy some fresh momentum that included short- and medium-term objectives. This communication was a signal for re-launching policy priorities, particularly with regard to growth and employment. In addition, the Commission proposed a new social policy agenda for the period from 2005 to 2010 by emphasising “a social Europe in the global economy: jobs and opportunities for all”.¹¹ Here, the Commission clearly insists on the strong need to develop a social integration approach by linking the fields of education and employment. The result was the Commission’s proposal to follow a comprehensive social and professional integration of young people. The European Council joined into these discussions by adopting the European Youth Pact in March 2005.

These measures gave youth issues a significant boost. In fact, for the first time at the EU level, the revised Lisbon Strategy on growth and jobs recognised that it was essential to integrate young people in society and working life to ensure sustained and sustainable growth in Europe. At this stage, the European Youth Pact represented the first significant change within youth policy at the EU level. With regard to growth and employment, youth policy had turned into a political issue. According to the EU institutions, the measures and actions proposed in this pact should be fully incorporated into the European strategies for employment; that is, the Social Inclusion Strategy and the Education and Training 2010 work programme. Member states were called upon to include all relevant measures for the employment, integration, and social advancement of young people into the ‘integrated guidelines for growth and employment (2005–2008)’, thus reflecting the renewed Lisbon priorities.¹²

Although youth was receiving stronger attention at the European level, scepticism remained: For instance, the Bureau of European Policy Advisers¹³ released a comprehensive strategic report in April 2007¹⁴ highlighting potential shortcomings of the European policy initiatives in the realm of youth unemployment; the Bureau emphasised a boost in apprenticeship and activation policies, especially to “reinforce the coordination between education and training institutions and employment” and to strengthen “apprenticeship schemes, diversify pathways to enter the labour market”.¹⁵ These recommendations stressed the need to facilitate entry into the labour market and to ensure conditionality benefits by mentioning good practices on national levels. A few months later, in September 2007, the European Commission released a communication on ‘promoting young people’s

10. [COM(2005) 24 final]. European Commission. Communication to the spring European Council of 2 February 2005 entitled “Working Together for Growth and Jobs. A New Start for the Lisbon Strategy”. Communication from President Barroso in agreement with Vice-President Verheugen.

11. [COM(2005) 33]. European Commission. Communication from the Commission. The Social Agenda.

12. The integrated guidelines (2005–2008) imply the employment and the broad economic policy guidelines in a single document. These guidelines thus simultaneously cover macroeconomic policies, employment, and structural reforms, presenting the principal policy instrument for developing and implementing the Lisbon Strategy.

13. The mission of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) is to provide timely, informed policy and political advice to the President and Commission.

14. Leanda Barrington-Leach et al., *Investing in Youth: An Empowerment Strategy* (Bureau of European Policy Advisers [BEPA], April 2007).

15. Ibid.

full participation in education, employment, and society¹⁶ to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions; the communication strongly stressed the need for a cross-sectoral youth policy within the EU and pointed out that the 2005 policy framework set up by the European Youth Pact was not sufficiently developed to help young people deal with the difficulties they faced. Instead, the Commission demanded that entities take youth policy more into account, with a stronger focus on youth policies in the framework of the renewed Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs. Hence, member states were encouraged to:

develop mobility and the opportunity for young people to look for a job abroad [and] establish flexicurity strategies with a view to career security and better employment conditions for young people in the next cycle of the Lisbon Strategy [...] and to give greater attention to youth in the National Reform Programmes.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Commission pointed out that member states were supposed to use EU funds (European Social Fund, European Regional Development Fund, and so on) to support young people's transition to employment.

As a result of this, the most recent integrated guidelines (2008–2010)¹⁸ encourage taking the European Youth Pact more into account, especially highlighting the transition from education to work. Nevertheless, all recommendations and guidelines formulate a generalised approach for the working and unemployed population – with youth still not seen as an independent group with specific solutions but rather as one of many other disadvantaged or vulnerable groups (such as older workers, women, migrants and people with handicaps). In this sense, all member states should “promote the social and labour market integration of the most disadvantaged”.¹⁹ The only change was that every young person who left school should be offered a job, apprenticeship, or additional training within four months by 2010²⁰ instead of the previously specified six months. Another point stressed in EU documents is the explicit recommendation that skills and competencies should be strongly adapted to the needs of the labour market. It is particularly noticeable that the policy fields of labour market and education increasingly merged into a cross-sectoral arena of policy measures.

Concerns about potential deficiencies of youth-related policies prevailed: In 2008, the Commission mandated an independent agency²¹ to conduct an evaluation of EU policy in the field of youth going back to 2001. All member states had to evaluate their strategies on youth by involving national

16. [COM(2007) 498 final]. European Commission. Communication from the Commission of 5 September 2007 to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions on Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society.

17. EUROPA. Summaries of EU legislation. Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/youth/c11103_en.htm.

18. [2008/618/EC]. European Council. Council Decision of 15 July 2008 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. ECOTEC Research & Consulting. UK.

authorities, youth organisations, and other stakeholders. The extensive consultation exercise supported the Commission in its aim to adopt a renewed youth strategy²² that was developed in subsequent years.

2.2 EU youth strategy

In April 2009, the Commission presented a communication entitled ‘An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering. A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities’.²³ The concept and course of action – activation and integration into the labour market – have remained the same and leaned on the idea of the European Youth Pact 2005. The novelty consisted in using the instruments of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). As a consequence, the EU Strategy for Youth called for more research and evidence-based youth policy, inviting all member states to organise a permanent and ‘Structured Dialogue’²⁴ amongst member states and young people. In November 2009, the EU Council adopted a resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field for the next decade (2010–2018), based on the above-mentioned Commission Communication.

The idea of a cross-sectoral approach was accepted by EU institutions and national governments, and eight fields of action were identified. Each field has its overall objectives and priorities, which must be outlined in separate cooperation frameworks and strategies. The fields designated as ‘employment and entrepreneurship’ and ‘education and training’ are the most important areas of action within the EES. They embrace policy initiatives to increase and improve “investments in the provision of suitable skills for those jobs in demand on the labour market with better matching in the short term and better anticipation in the longer term of the skills needed” or call for taking “the specific situation of young people into account when devising flexicurity strategies”.²⁵ It is noteworthy that the Council proposes 74 different initiatives and specified 11 initiatives in the field of ‘employment and entrepreneurship’ alone. Although more objectives and priorities of the eight action fields identify young people as a policy target, and although the overall strategy introduces a youth perspective into different policy fields, it is obvious that the huge number of initiatives in the various areas of action reached a challenging level of monitoring and implementation. In fact, the many initiatives are nothing less than proposals that can be adopted by member states; they are not mandatory due to the principle of subsidiarity.

22. This report provides an overview of the views and findings presented by Member States in their national reports, in relation to the past cycle of cooperation in youth policy. Each country was asked six questions, and this report is structured according to the questions.

23. [COM(2009) 200 final]. European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 27 April 2009 – An EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering – A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities.

24. The structured dialogue with young people and youth organisations serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection on national youth-related policies and on the priorities, implementation, and follow-up of European cooperation in the youth field.

25. [Official Journal C 311]. European Council.

In 2010, the European Parliament and European youth organisations issued a strong warning concerning youth policy. They posited the need to “turn Generation Lost to Generation Hope”²⁶ by putting youth at the top of the agenda. The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs of the EU Parliament called on the Commission and member states to take a rights-based approach to youth and employment by stipulating labour standards related to quality of work, such as working time, minimum wages, social security, and occupational health and safety. In their Draft Report ‘on promoting youth access to the labour market, strengthening trainee, internship and apprenticeship status’²⁷ (March 2010), the Council and the Commission are asked “to define a job strategy for the EU that combines financial instruments and employment policies in order to avoid ‘jobless growth’ and entails setting ambitious benchmarks for the employment of young people”.²⁸ Additionally, the Parliament called on all member states “to establish inclusive and targeted labour market policies that secure the respectful inclusion and meaningful occupation of young people; e.g., through the setting-up of inspirational networks, trainee arrangements, international career centres, and youth centres for individual guidance”.²⁹ In the entire report, the Parliament suggested an improvement of EU youth policy and a better monitoring system, such as binding youth benchmarks and improved governance tools for the work on youth employment within the OMC. With regard to strategies and governance tools at the EU level, the Parliament reminded that “the Council and the Commission come forward with a European Youth Guarantee securing the right of every young person in the EU to be offered a job, an apprenticeship, additional training, or combined work and training after a maximum period of six months’ unemployment” and invited the Commission to “evaluate existing youth benchmarks and the Youth Guarantee every year in order to deliver results and progress”.³⁰ These interventions voiced a basic concern about the possibility that the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010–2018), promoted by the Commission and the Council, might fail due to the big number of initiatives that cannot easily be implemented by all member states as national targets. Moreover, the cross-sectoral approach was conceptualised in a vague way, so that it was unclear who was to take responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the European Youth Strategy in its various areas of action. It is probable that different initiatives will remain divided into different OMC processes – such as the social OMC or the training, education, or employment OMC – so that youth-related issues are discussed in different contexts. This results in many coexisting measures that do not correspond to a holistic approach proposed by the EU Parliament within its Draft Report on promoting youth access to the labour market; that is, by strengthening trainee, internship, and apprenticeship status.³¹

26. [2009/2221(INI)]. European Parliament. Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (2010). Amendments 1-152. Draft Opinion on promoting youth access to the labor market, strengthening trainee, internship, and apprenticeship status.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. [2009/2221(INI)]. European Parliament.

In May 2010, the European Council adopted the resolution 'on the active inclusion of young people: combating unemployment and poverty'³² and agreed that active inclusion of young people should focus mainly on two specific fields of action: education and training, and employment and entrepreneurship. In this respect, the current EU youth policy focuses on social integration by promoting transition pathways from education to employment and by highlighting education and skill requirements of the labour market. This renewed youth policy approach was included in the October 2010 employment guidelines of the EES. The initiatives and recommendations were also integrated into the EU Strategy 2020 and structure the new Flagships Initiatives.

2.3 EU Strategy 2020 and youth-related Flagship Initiatives

The European Strategy 2020 is a follow-up strategy of the Lisbon Strategy for the next decade, proposed by the Commission to emerge stronger from the crisis and turn the EU into a smart, sustainable, inclusive economy. The new strategy consists of five EU headline targets for 2020, followed by seven flagship initiatives to catalyse the progress. In line with the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Employment Strategy now encompasses three main policy fields: *job creation*, *skills*, and *combating poverty*. Therefore, the EU 2020 strategy is established institutionally in a smaller set of integrated Europe 2020 guidelines (integrating employment and broad economic policy guidelines). Consequently, the current Draft Joint Employment report (2011) addresses only a few youth-specific suggestions.³³ More explicit references to youth (un)employment are made within the Commission's Flagship Initiatives, which should boost 'inclusive growth' and meet the headline targets of the EES. With regard to youth-related employment policy, the Flagship Initiatives of Agenda for New Skills and Jobs and Youth on the Move are the most relevant.

2.3.1 Agenda for New Skills and Jobs

The Flagship Initiative of Agenda for New Skills and Jobs aims to modernise labour markets and empower people by developing their own skills throughout the lifecycle by increasing labour participation and better matching labour supply and demand, including labour mobility. The Flagship New Skills for New Jobs resumes the previous initiative launched in 2008³⁴ by the Commission's agenda for better skills upgrading, anticipation, and matching. This flagship is directly linked to the headline targets of the EES at large and thus has little to do with youth-specific solutions. Again, youth is not explicitly mentioned as a separate target but rather as part of a larger group of vulnerable strata of the population, such as women or older workers, with all key priorities pertain to women, older workers, and young people alike. Only a few recommendations focus specifically on young people –

32. [2010/C 137/01]. European Council. Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the active inclusion of young people: combating unemployment and poverty.

33. Ibid.

34. [COM(2011) 11 final, Annex 3]. European Commission. Communication to the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. New Skills for New Jobs. anticipating and matching labor market and skills needs.

such as targeted job-search assistance and career guidance – whereby training and job experience programmes have to be tailored to the special needs of the labour market. Member states are asked to introduce new benchmarks in the area of education to promote employability, thus preparing young people for the transition to the labour market. The agenda for new skills and jobs complements the Commission’s Youth on the Move Flagship, which aims to help young people gain the knowledge, skills, and experience they need to make their first job a reality.

2.3.2 Youth on the Move

The Youth on the Move Flagship, launched in 2010, is the newest initiative within the ongoing strategies in the field of youth policies, presenting a specific framework for youth employment.³⁵ It was designed as a comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe and is placed within the “existing arrangements for the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020), the European Employment Strategy and the EU youth strategy”.³⁶ The main idea is making it easier for young workers to move and work within the European Union and acquire new skills and competencies. This requires more transparency and information on available jobs for young jobseekers; thus, new instruments are needed to monitor labour and skills demand throughout Europe. Your First EURES Job and European Vacancy Monitor are examples of this kind of pilot project or mobility instrument that should be managed by EURES, the European job mobility network of Public Employment Services.

The allocation of responsibilities has remained the same, because the employment guidelines provide a common framework for the coordination of national policy actions. Hence, given the fact that the EU lacks proper competencies in the field of labour market policies, member states are exclusively responsible for implementation of related European policy initiatives. The Commission sees the following as its contribution in supporting member states:

Design and implementation of actions through funding and the open methods of coordination, notably through reinforced mutual learning and peer reviews with national governments, regional and local policymakers and other stakeholders and practitioners, as well as through regular monitoring of, and co-operation on, ESF programmes.³⁷

The Flagship Initiative consists of three headline targets: ‘help to get the first job and start a career’, ‘support youth at risk’, and ‘provide adequate social safety nets for young people’. As mentioned, public employment services are identified as important players, especially in searching for jobs and facilitating entrance into the labour market. In this respect, the Commission aims to strengthen a bilateral and regional policy dialogue on youth employment and is committed to establishing a new

35. [COM(2010) 477 final]. European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. Youth on the Move. An initiative to unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth in the European Union.

36. Ibid.

37. [COM(2010) 477 final], European Commission.21.

mutual learning programme for European public employment services. Further, the communication stresses modernisation of social security systems so that young people receive appropriate access to social benefits, even if they are not entitled to benefits. However, the Commission asks to ensure that benefits are awarded only to young people if they are engaged in active job search or in further education or training. A additional part of the Flagship Initiative deals with the “wage arrangements and non-wage labour costs that should not contribute to precariousness”.³⁸ To prevent the situation of a segmented labour market – with young workers suffering an alternating sequence of temporary jobs and unemployment – public policies should allow for more stable, open-ended contracts and solve the problem of incomplete contributions to pension systems.

Youth on the Move has been well received by European institutions. In fact, the Council,³⁹ the European Parliament,⁴⁰ the Committee of the Regions,⁴¹ and the European Economic and Social Committee⁴² converge in their conclusions that youth unemployment needs to be addressed in a more proactive manner. They share the Commission’s analysis that youth unemployment rates have reached an unacceptable level and that labour market segmentation risks forcing young people into low-quality and badly paid internships and precarious jobs. They agree that actions should be taken in regard to improvement of education and training, career counselling, and job placement as well as the creation of more and better jobs. In particular, they laud the Flagship’s specific recommendations, such as the Youth Guarantee, the quality framework for internships or traineeships, better career and vocational-orientation guidance services, and more stable job contracts. Finally, policy actors share the need to encourage member states to use available European funds and engage in broader consultations with civil society organisations – amongst them, the youth themselves.⁴³ Criticism is raised in regard to the specification of recommended key actions and measures, the evaluation of possible side effects, the allocation of the necessary funds, intensification of consultations with the regions and cities, social partners and the organised civil society, and the need to improve implementation at the national and local levels.

In conformity to the Flagship Initiative, the EU institutions lay particular emphasis on education and skills, mobility, and labour market inclusion. Measures against labour market segmentation and precariousness are mentioned but remain vague. Moreover, social security is discussed only

38. [COM(2010) 477 final],. European Commission.16.

39. [11838/11]. The Council of the EU. Promoting youth employment to achieve the Europe 2020 objectives. Council Conclusions.

40. [2010/2307, INI]. European Parliament. Report on Youth on the Move: A framework for improving Europe’s education and training systems, by the Committee on Culture and Education, including the Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs.

41. [CdR 292/2010 fm]. Committee of the Regions. Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Youth on the Move.

42. [SOC/365]. European Economic and Social Committee. Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission on Youth on the Move.

43. [8664/11]. Draft Council Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council on the structured dialogue with young people on youth employment, from 15 April 2011.

marginally. Some policy actors support “the European Commission's desire to ensure that all young people have adequate social security cover”,⁴⁴ but these statements are rare and quite general. Rather, the Council, the Parliament, and the Economic and Social Committee mention the need to modernise social protection systems. The Council, for instance, highlights that “social protection systems need to be designed in such a way that they provide adequate protection and at the same time give incentives in order to promote young people's transitions and to avoid the risk of long-term exclusion and poverty”.⁴⁵ However, here, the focus is not on developing common social protection standards for young people but on education, transition, and labour market inclusion because “labour-market participation also makes an important contribution to ensuring the long-term sustainability of social benefit and pension systems and the stability of public finances as a whole.”⁴⁶

Thus, the Flagship Initiative Youth on the Move is the first European policy framework on youth that identifies general objectives and priorities, key areas of action, and more specific measures: the youth guarantee, a quality framework for internships, single and open-ended contracts. Moreover, it integrates several ideas and concepts from previous policy initiatives in an incremental manner, thus guaranteeing some continuity in policy deliberation and decision-making. However, the incremental dynamic is responsible for the bias towards employability and labour market inclusion measures, when compared with the attention being paid to social rights and benefits. Still lacking is a more comprehensive and coherent policy strategy to tackle the multidimensional problem of youth unemployment.

3 Assessing European Policy Initiatives: The Stakeholders' Perspective

In this chapter, we evaluate European policy initiatives in the field of youth unemployment from the perspective of the participating policy actors. Our target is threefold: First, we will describe the policy dimension by highlighting what various policy actors think about the current European policy initiatives and instruments. Second, we will present the actors' views of the policymaking process in the area of youth, in particular the Open Method of Coordination. Finally, it is necessary to reflect on the role of civil society organisations regarding their observations and opinions. For these purposes, we will unfold our findings drawn from a series of documents and interviews with members of the Employment Committee, Parliament, social partners, and civil society organisations. These interviews help decipher the political situation regarding youth and youth unemployment policies, thus preparing the ground for some conclusions and recommendations.

44. For example, [CdR 292/2010 fm]. The Committee of the Regions. Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Youth on the Move, 5.

45. [11838/11]. The Council of the EU. Promoting youth employment to achieve the Europe 2020 objectives. Council Conclusions, 6.

46. Ibid.

3.1 Youth and youth unemployment: Different definitions and policy approaches

The previous document analysis has shown that European institutions have identified youth unemployment as a prominent societal problem for more than one decade. Moreover, from time to time policy debates within the Youth OMC and the EES centre on this issue. In particular, we have presented a number of initiatives adopted by the Council and the Commission to take steps against youth unemployment and avoid social exclusion amongst young people. These initiatives seem to instigate numerous policy initiatives at the level of member states. This is the message conveyed by the paper on 'News Policies to Support Youth? Now Please!'⁴⁷ currently circulating on the EMCO homepage, which assembles the great number of future priorities of member states' policy reforms.

In sum, today there is a stronger political will to combat youth employment, a more intense policy debate amongst member states, and an active approach of identifying and formulating problem-solving strategies and policy instruments. However, youth unemployment is still on the increase. Since the economic recession, youth unemployment has risen dramatically⁴⁸ so that youth unemployment rates are two or three times higher than adult unemployment rates in most member states.⁴⁹ Hence, although youth unemployment is one of the most striking problems since the early 1980s, it is still an unsolved policy issue within the European Union. Moreover, the number of young unemployed and the situation of jobless youth are very different amongst member states, thus demonstrating that policy learning and coordination is yet to be developed. These brief observations illustrate that it is worth looking at the potential problems facing European coordination of youth unemployment policies.

3.1.1 Phenomenon of youth and youth unemployment

Youth unemployment has not always been seen as a core problem at the EU level. The issue caught attention and became a seriously debated problem only after youth unemployment rates rose in reaction to the economic crisis in 2008. In 2009, the EU Parliament called for action by promoting a motto ("Let's turn Generation Lost to Generation Hope") that decisively influenced subsequent policy deliberations.⁵⁰ Our interview partners agree that the policy agenda of EU institutions has changed due to these developments. "Youth employment has gained a lot of importance – with the unemployment and the crisis. And then also you have a lot of other stakeholders just picking up the topic."⁵¹ In the course of the EU 2020 Strategy, "youth unemployment has been recognised by fairly high decision-makers and policymakers. And everywhere you can read that this is a problem, this is

47. EMCO: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=101&langId=en&newsId=971&furtherNews=yes> [11.05.2011].

48. European Commission (2010), Recent developments in the EU-27 labor market for young people aged 15–29. A statistical overview prepared by DG EMPL as a background document for the Youth on the Move Communication.

49. EMCO Report (2010), Ad Hoc Group report on the 2010 thematic review [Part 1. 'Policies to support youth].

50. [2009/2221(INI)].European Parliament.

- 51. Interview with European Youth Forum (EYF), 22.11.2010.

scandalous, this is unprecedented”.⁵² All interviews consistently show that youth unemployment is now acknowledged and recognised as an enormous problem. The significant momentum is that “youth unemployment is very high up among the commissioner's priorities, and Europe must do everything it can to reduce high rates of youth unemployment [because] this will not only cause problems today but even more problems tomorrow”.⁵³ Hence, the EU institutions have learned that youth unemployment demands more action than before. Moreover, important stakeholders are ever more “worried about this lost generation”.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, a number of interview partners highlight that “although it's been recognised as something very important, you don't see it here coming out from Brussels”.⁵⁵ Another interview partner criticises this aspect more precisely and regrets that youth unemployment:

[...] is not a top agenda. Everybody is talking about youth unemployment in this house, but when it comes to the reports and the real attention put in to it, it's not placed in the centre of our discussion, which is a shame. On the overall level I don't think that youth policy is in the centre of European policies.⁵⁶

A further interviewee criticises that policy debates might come too late: “I mean, this was the world year of youth, and we are already talking about a lost generation!”⁵⁷

These statements uncover an apparent contradiction: On the one hand, there is a desire and the will to move in the fight against youth unemployment; on the other hand, a consistent course of action is missing in regard to practical solutions. We assume that barriers and obstacles exist that hinder the actors in transforming common ideas and concepts into practice. Hence, the following section will present different thematic aspects that could provide some explanations concerning the development and implementation of common strategies against youth unemployment. In relation to this, we first need to understand how actors define ‘youth’ and ‘youth unemployment’. It is necessary to examine how actors reflect upon youth unemployment and in which dimensions they categorise young people. These findings enable us to better understand the ideational concepts of youth and thus the cognitive frames of reflection underlying EU level policymaking. For this purpose, the next section presents and discusses statements of representatives of different institutions and of core policy documents.

3.1.2 Definition of ‘youth’ and ‘youth unemployment’

The analysis of interviews and documents allows revealing two lines of argument that imply two different ways of identifying and defining youth and youth unemployment. On the one hand, there is the notion of youth that defines it mainly as an age category. Youth is an age group with specific

52. Interview with European Youth Forum (EYF).

53. Interview with Commission: DG Employment, 22.09.2010.

54. Ibid.

55. Interview with EYF.

56. Interview with Member of Parliament, 05.10.2010.

57. Interview with European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), 18.01.2011.

(statistically observable) risks to become unemployed. On the other hand, the idea of youth as a discreet social group of individuals – sharing very specific life chances, life forms, and identities – is promoted. While the former position is against developing youth-specific policies, the latter is more inclined to do exactly this. Following, we will present these two positions in detail, arguing that policy actors are not totally committed to one of position exclusively. However, they tend to lean towards the one or the other.

Youth and age-related unemployment risks. The document ‘EU Indicators in the Field of Youth’⁵⁸ highlights that “the EU Youth Strategy does not operate with an official definition for the specific period in life when a person is considered to be young”.⁵⁹ Most often, however, official EU documents and key policy actors tend to favour a minimalistic concept of youth that identifies this group primarily in terms of age categories.⁶⁰ In other words, particularly when age-related issues are at stake, youth becomes a topic.⁶¹ This inclination towards a minimalistic conception of youth discards the notion that youth is a singular social group awaiting a separate treatment. Our interviews provide evidence for this conclusion, although positions are ambivalent. For instance, the Commission representative argues:

[The] youth employment strategy is dealt with in terms of young people as a discreet group, possibly facing particular issues and problems along with many other groups on the European labour market. There is this general focus on young people as a group and, for example, women. In the previous strategy, there was a specific target for the employment rate of women, usually dealt with under sort of gender policies of segregated professions, discrimination against women in particular, pay gap to the disfavour of women. And youth are seen as a particular group, I mean young people, for example, have roughly twice the average unemployment rate as other people.⁶²

While this member of the Commission acknowledges that youth is a discreet group, he qualifies this statement by two indications: On the one hand, he speaks of *possible* problems arising from higher age-related risks of unemployment. The ‘possibility’ of youth-related problems is thus a probabilistic assertion rooted on age-related statistical observations. On the other hand, he speaks about different policy targets of the EES, arguing that young people are just one of many disadvantaged or vulnerable groups – such as older workers, women, migrants, and people with handicaps – all of which are affected by unemployment. Ultimately, we can conclude that this policy approach strives to develop an overarching policy strategy applicable to the general problem of unemployment, even if this strategy might require adaptations to the needs of the various groups at risk of unemployment. As we will see,

58. [SEC (2011) 401 final]. European Commission. [Commission Staff Working Document. On EU indicators in the field of youth.

59. Ibid.

60. The following section will be based on one interview with a member of the Commission because it helps to unveil a specific conception of youth. This does not mean, however, that the Commission is the only institution to promote these ideas. As indicated, we argue that this position has been institutionalized largely in the EES and is thus supported by the majority of policy actors.

61. Paraphrase of an Interview with Support Team within the EMCO, 11.04.2011.

62. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

this conception is governed implicitly by the notion of 'One Size Fits All'. In fact, the EES is committed to promote employability, for instance, by means of lifelong learning. Education has become the most prominent area of policymaking because it provides a common solution to the unemployed at large, with different risk groups – the young, migrants, older workers, and women – included. Moreover, this approach allows development of more targeted instruments along the specific relation these risk groups maintain to the labour market; for instance, by identifying measures smoothing the transition from school to work, increasing (language) skills, or vocational training and lifelong learning.

This inclination towards a minimalistic conception of youth does not exclude a more encompassing problem analysis and policy agenda. In fact, our interview partner at the Commission is well aware that “young people, almost by definition, have very little experience on the job market. So there may or may not be the need for particular social security regimes, or different minimum wage regimes”.⁶³ Involuntary part-time employment, temporary contracts, low levels of pay, and reduced contributions to social security systems are amongst those problems addressed in EU documents on youth. The Commission representative joins into this analysis by pointing out:

Young people have also been one of the groups hardest hit by the economic downturn and that young workers were often amongst the first to lose their jobs during the crisis, as their temporary contracts were not renewed and job prospects for young graduates entering the labour market have also diminished, and they are competing with jobseekers with more employment experience in a market with fewer jobs to offer.⁶⁴

However, the focus of attention is on age-related difficulties of young people in leaving the educational system and accessing the labour market. A more holistic and cross-sectoral approach is in the making, yet still underdeveloped.

A further problem arising from this minimalistic approach is related to the preference of the EU institutions for identifying and assessing the problem of youth unemployment exclusively in terms of a few macro indicators. In fact, the OMC is primarily oriented towards comparing unemployment rates as indicators of policy performances. The Commission representative explains this approach: “You either look at it of a macro sense or you just look at the outcomes. Or see Netherlands, Denmark [and] now Germany has relatively very low rates of young people, so they must be doing something right.”⁶⁵ According to this quote, policy solutions to the problem of unemployment are evaluated against outcomes; here, in particular, low unemployment rates. As we will see later on, policy choices are thus governed by statistical observations about (age-related) unemployment risks, with the danger that the specific situation of the younger jobless – also in countries with a ‘good policy performance’ – is neglected. Thus, the generalised policy approach risks missing its own general goals; namely, the

63. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

64. [COM(2011) SYSDM]. European Commission. Community System of Documentation on Employment: “Youth Employment Measures. European Employment Observatory Review 2010”.

65. [COM(2011) SYSDM]. European Commission.

“desire to ensure that young people have the best possible employment prospects, but along with all other groups”.⁶⁶

Youth-related problems of unemployment and individuals needs. Another approach to define youth, to identify youth-related problems, and to respond to the problem of youth unemployment is presented by civil society organisations and one representative of the European Parliament. They see youth unemployment as a distinct problem and ask for separate solutions. In their opinion, youth unemployment “has to be very clearly linked to the economic policies and the general employment policies. But as an addition to that, we also need to look at what is separate for young people, why is it that they are twice as unemployed as everyone else. There are some characteristics around young peoples’ problems that we need to understand”.⁶⁷ This quote shows that there are commonalities as well as differences to the previous approach. On the one hand, we see that this interview partner uses similar statistical references to employment rates to highlight the importance of the policy problem at stake. On the other hand, however, she uses this reference just to ask for a better understanding of the societal problems faced by young unemployed.

This demand is supported by other interviewers as well, who ask “to take kind of a positive, reasonably positive approach towards this with monitoring, what is happening in the youth labour market? Especially after graduating and that there should be some help, assistance, guidance in place to ensure that they are not out of the labour market”.⁶⁸ For these organisations, youth is defined not only by age but also by other dimensions, including social, economic, and personal factors. According to this approach, young people are considered individual cases with specific youth-related characteristics, thus promoting the idea of youth as a social group with specific life chances, life forms, and identities. Consequently, she claims that young people are a separate group that requires a comprehensive youth-specific policy strategy. Moreover, she sees the need to put the individual case in the centre of political attention: first because unemployment resides on a multiplicity of detrimental factors that can be tackled only on the level of individual cases, and, second, because of the overarching policy goals of activation and empowerment, which are both targeting the individual.

For these reasons, the basic intention of youth-related policies must be to preserve “youth’s autonomy”⁶⁹ and take more into account their specific problems and circumstances. One interviewee describes it as follows:

[If] you go to a job centre, they tell you to fill in a form, which is standard for everybody else and they try to fit you into a niche, they try to fit you into a box. Whereas a person is a person. A person is an individual and not an economical unit. A person may have a disability, a

66. [COM(2011) SYSDEM]. European Commission.

67. Interview with Member of Parliament.

68. Interview with EYF.

69. Interview with EYF.

particular family situation, all sorts of circumstances which are not adequately taken into account.⁷⁰

This quote shows clearly that the problem of youth unemployment is not defined from a macro perspective but more from an individual point of view. It argues that unemployment is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be seized and solved only when considering the specific situation of young people in general and of the individual cases in particular. Solving unemployment does not mean only raising employment rates but rather enhancing the individual situation. In this respect, this group asks for a holistic approach that focuses more closely on young people as individuals, including all socioeconomic dimensions of their personal living circumstances. The multidimensionality of unemployment as a social problem calls for a cross-sectoral policy strategy. Next to labour market policies, well-being and active social inclusion are important fields of action too. This implies that policymakers at EU and national levels need to put much more emphasis on social security schemes and benefits because “if you are a young person who has never held a job, you are not eligible for unemployment benefits”.⁷¹

Interview partners show concern about the weaknesses of social security systems for young people. Some member states have very low levels of social security standards and benefits for young unemployed, so that financial distress makes job-finding difficult and can lead young people further into dependency. Finally, in addition to better access to social benefits, it is necessary to create a comprehensive support for young job seekers that is able to facilitate entry into the labour market by assisting young people in their individual situation.

These observations highlight that civil society organisations do not identify the core problem of unemployment on the side of individual (young) job seekers alone. For them, it is not enough to educate and train job seekers to adapt them better to the exigencies of labour market. All to the contrary: They argue that it is necessary to monitor mechanisms and framework conditions within the labour market. To “address the whole problem”⁷², they see the need of “bringing the people to the labour market and bringing the labour market to the people”⁷³. This demand is supported by the trade unions, which campaign for better jobs, wages, and social security measures as an alternative road to problem-solving.

3.2 Policy priorities under review: Limits and problems of current policies

The current strategy for youth employment at the EU level is governed by the idea that better education and training will help to solve the problems, even if the Commission also sees the need to enhance the quality of jobs and modernise social security systems. Within the EES, the Commission recommends that each country improve school education, reduce school dropout, and develop

70. Interview with EAPN.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

training for young people. The transition from school to work especially should be facilitated by establishing training centres or offering apprenticeships to equip young people with matched skills. Thus, the general consent at the EU level is a focus on skills and education. The current initiatives Youth on the Move and New Skills for New Jobs provide examples of this policy orientation because they do not ignore the deficiencies of labour markets and social security systems but centre mainly on qualifications and skills. This has unleashed political debates within the EU. In the following, we will describe the main problems of the European policy strategy, as identified within these debates.

3.2.1 Keys to success: Education and skills?

The guiding policy approach to the problem of youth unemployment can be outlined with the keywords *education*, *matched skills by training*, and *integration* into the labour market. Our interview partners converge in the assessment that “the whole system is pertaining to both, how young people are educated, and then trained and formed and the transition from that education into work”.⁷⁴ The main idea circulating within this discussion is that “the better equipped you are, more training you have, the easiest it's going to be to find a job”.⁷⁵ It promotes one policy response to the current economic crises and its implications for youth unemployment at the EU level. However, this guiding policy idea is questioned from different angles: There is concern about the extent to which the promotion of higher levels of qualification is helpful. Criticism even mounts to the suspicion that the educational bias of the European strategy is an attempt “just to keep them [the young people] in education so they don't appear in the statistics, or is it to take advantage of the young well prepared people?”⁷⁶

Within these debates, education is not questioned in itself, because everybody agrees on the high value of education. Yet, civil society organisations and trade unions point to the fact that high unemployment rates are not only caused by a low level of educational attainment, thus raising doubts about the possibility that only qualification and training will actually facilitate transition from school to work. If the aim is to enhance a well-qualified young generation, it is necessary to ensure the quality of jobs “because people do internships and end up doing photo copies”⁷⁷ and, moreover, to “give people a chance to work”.⁷⁸ The question “how much intern experience can you get before somebody finally trusts you with a job?”⁷⁹ raises fears that training jobs create a permanent third labour market for unemployed people who have no more chance of getting work. One reason that young people find it difficult to enter into the labour market might reside in a lack of work-related skills and experiences, but the structural economic problems is the lack of work, which hinders young people to work even if “we have an extremely well prepared generation”.⁸⁰ Civil society organisations are especially concerned about these developments and ask for practical measures to create a more favourable environment

74. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

75. Interview with EAPN.

76. Interview with European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), 22.11.2010.

77. Interview with EAPN.

78. Interview with EPSU.

79. Interview with EAPN.

80. Interview with EPSU.

within the labour market. Instead of postponing the problem by putting young people in training as a secret reserve, they demand a more open and accessible labour market for all. In reference to this, the initiative Youth on the Move is under close observation by trade unions and civil society organisations, demanding that announcements on the need to develop non-segmented labour markets and more responsive social security systems be followed by more specific recommendations and measures.

3.2.2 Implementing Youth on the Move

With regard to the problems related to youth unemployment, the Flagship Initiative Youth on the Move, launched by the Commission, is welcomed by different EU institutions, member states, and public interest groups. The “four months ‘Youth Guarantee’, a quality framework for internships, and adequate social safety nets for young people”⁸¹ are especially lauded as important decisions. Interview partners also applaud the fact that this initiative is giving social partners and civil society organisations a new platform for exchange and new possibilities to get involved in political processes. For instance, “the European Youth Forum is working now with the European social partners and other NGOs and also with Emily Turunen of the Parliament, on an initiative to have a European quality charter on internships or to have a certain agreed minimum standard”.⁸²

However, expectations are high. Hence, the Flagship is also critically examined. In particular, the problem of implementation is heavily debated:

We have the Youth on the Move proposal, which is again not bad, as a proposal with some good elements. I mentioned the youth guarantee before. But then in terms of implementation, for the moment it's a question mark, because [...] the words are nice, but then it has to be followed by acts. Who will finance the measures? Who will implement the measures? We know that it's supposed to be the member states, but if the member states do not organise anything, than we won't have anything.⁸³

All interview partners express reservations, in particular with regard to the ability of the EU to transfer all these policy ideas into political and administrative practices at the national level. The following excerpt gives a brief overview:

So, the first problem with mobility is that, okay, they keep saying also in Youth on the Move how we're going to encourage young people to move all over the place. But not every young person in the European Union has the right to work in any country of the European Union.

The second problem is that so many other things are not put in place. Because moving is a huge enterprise. Moving to a different country is massive. And we're doing rather badly at

81. European Youth Forum 2010: European Youth Forum responds to Youth on the Move, <http://www.eaea.org/news.php?aid=17644&k=-3&%20d=2010-09>.

82. Interview with EYF.

83. Interview with European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). 18.01.2011.

integrating migrants. Be they extra-European or intra-European. Because since we have difficulties integrating, for instance, third country nationals, it's not easier to integrate Europeans. This is because if you go to Sweden, you still have to learn Swedish. So there exists language barrier and what is about access to information about rights? I mean what if we worked in one country for a few years and then you move to another country, all these things. All these things are not yet taken into account because it hasn't been discussed as an integrated strategy. We're speaking about something that is very present at the EU level, not so much at national level.⁸⁴

Interview partners tend to stress that the initiative Youth on the Move is mostly restricted to the arena of EU politics and rather a "desire of the Commission".⁸⁵ Despite the fact that it presents promising headlines to fight against youth unemployment, its applicability at the national level is still limited due to language barriers and problems of accessing national labour markets and social security systems. This makes it almost impossible to work across borders within the EU. Moreover, the challenge is not only a political one but also a financial one: Member states might find it difficult to develop youth-specific labour market and social policies and programmes. In addition to this, it is not sufficient to prepare young people by providing them with skills because it is necessary to improve the structural problem of a lack of work. Finally, most relevant questions and demands are related to member states' country-specific labour markets and employment policies. Especially social NGOs highlight "the need for member states to act and commit enough financial resources and propose concrete plans for the implementation of these proposals".⁸⁶ Equally, the Commission is asked to invest energy into this issue:

To be really satisfied at EU Level I would have the Commission to announce this as a main priority within the 2020, to have a strategy group sitting and discussing how we can improve this situation for young people in Europe. So we don't lose a generation here. So, to highlight and to give the political attention it needs.⁸⁷

Because employment policy lies within the competence and responsibility of the member states, there are growing calls for allocating more EU social funds, encouraging member states to invest more European funds into fighting youth unemployment.

3.3 Understanding political limitations: Conflicts of interest

At the beginning of this chapter, we pointed out that European initiatives (such as Youth on the Move) do formulate general objectives yet still lack a systematic course of action. Our interviews show that this is caused by different conflicts of interests that impede development of more proactive guidelines

84. Interview with EAPN.

85. Interview with EMCO Member of Germany, ministry of labor and social policy, 20.10.2010.

86. European Youth Forum 2011: EP Youth Intergroup discusses Youth on the Move with Commissioner Vassiliou and young people. Press releases.

87. Interview with Member of Parliament.

in the realm of youth unemployment and hinder implementation of the accorded policy ideas and concepts. In the following section, we provide evidence for these conflicts of interest by highlighting some examples of thematic aspects recently negotiated at the European and national levels. These examples demonstrate that there are conflicting interests and views amongst political actors at the European and national levels, which help us understand why a more comprehensive and youth-specific policy strategy could not be developed within the framework of the EES and why the policy measures developed by the EU institutions are badly implemented at the national level.

Policy responsibilities and competences with regard to employment and labour markets are strongly attached to the member states. The implementation and realisation of European policy initiatives thus depend on political will and on the institutional and socioeconomic structures of member states. Thus, European coordination has to struggle with country-specific labour markets and social security systems, in addition to diverging policy strategies against youth unemployment. Although youth unemployment is now a high priority at the EU level, it is also true that any specific policy recommendation and initiative will unleash a number of competing political interests and opinions by governments, public interests groups, and experts at the European and national levels. Our interviews with the Commission and the support team within the EMCO give evidence of the controversial nature of European coordination in the realm of youth unemployment, illustrating diverging interests and motives amongst political actors. With regard to the issue of a youth guarantee and minimum wage, our interview partner within the Commission explains:

In the previous guidelines [2007] there was a target that all young people should be given a new start within six months. We reduced this to four months. We made it a more ambitious target. I mean, member states did reluctantly. I agree that is the highest levels, but in practice a number of the actual operational policy officials saying, well, possibly our heads of state and government agreed to this, but we're not convinced this is the right thing. A number of countries think that it's much better to allow other mechanisms for young people to get a job. [Because] in practice, many member states would say, 'We don't have the money, we don't have the financial mechanisms; we don't have the other resources.' Some countries say you can't have access unless you have a job. And the commission will say this doesn't make any sense. But again, the countries will look at services, which are already overburdened.⁸⁸

In this case, financial resources were the decisive argument advanced by member states. This had an influence on their readiness to agree on common guidelines and implement them in their national contexts. However, keep in mind that the European policy debates about youth unemployment comprise many other contentious issues – for example, minimum wage, access to social security benefits, activation measures, and so on – that obstruct a European coordination of national policies.

Conflict of opinions and interests do not emerge only amongst different national governments but also amongst different societal interests at the national and European levels (e.g., social partners, political parties). Core issues at stake within these debates are often related to the question of whether high

88. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

youth unemployment requires a further liberalisation of national labour markets and a subsequent flexibilization of work places and contracts. In this regard, we see a further clash of interests and views, making a youth-specific and consistent policy strategy against employment very unlikely.

Amongst the policy actors, we have proponents of a further liberalisation and flexibilization of labour markets, who explicitly justify their demands with regard to youth unemployment. According to this position, young people are the first ones to suffer from labour market rigidities, such as legal protection against dismissals that privilege labour market insiders and keep outsiders in joblessness, amongst them many young job-seekers. Liberalized and more flexible labour markets would increase the volatility and fluctuation of youth unemployment, because young people are those most affected by downturns, but they are also the first ones to be hired in upturns. According to this position, a European strategy against youth unemployment should thus prioritize high employment rates and a stronger liberalization and flexibilization of labour markets, even if this will push young job-seekers into a secondary labour market of fixed-term employment contracts and low wages, because it provides them with a first access into the labour market and a personal career plan. This position is promoted by the employers and their associations. However, on the European level these organisations have been less active, as explained by an interview partner: “the business world has been clearly less involved. They don't see this as a particular problem. I mean except in a rather general sense. I don't think the business world has said, you know, ‘we as business must do our utmost to ensure that unemployment in young people is addressed.’ I mean, they put it among a list of priorities, but not a particular priority”.⁸⁹

The other position criticises this orientation on liberalisation and flexibilization. It assumes that the former demands are driven by the employers' own interests, as they appreciate volatility, flexibility, and temporary contracts for the only reason that enterprises can derive maximum benefit from them “because if they need to cut production, it's good to have temporary contracts, and it's good that young people are ready to take up this contract. You don't even need to terminate the contracts, you just wait until the contract runs out and then you just let them go and that's it”.⁹⁰ However, opponents of policies privileging flexibilization and liberalisation are divided in regard to their own demands. Trade unions, for instance, have an ambivalent position when discussing youth unemployment. While they see the need for more action concerning young job seekers, given the dramatically high unemployment rates in some European member states, they are quite prudent in calling for youth-specific measures and initiatives. In fact, youth-specific measures and programmes could lead to a general relaxation of standards in the realm of wages, contracts, working conditions, and social security entitlements (along the lines of the previous policy position), thus endangering established rights of older workers in particular and of the general work force at large.

Hence, both social partners were little committed to push EU institutions and national governments into a youth-specific and more proactive policy strategies. The employers' associations did not see in

89. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

90. Interview with EPSU.

youth unemployment as a high-priority issue, while trade unions feared the potentially negative consequences of a youth-specific policy initiative. This deadlock is described by our Commission representative about the issue of flexible contracts:

If the government makes a proposal to introduce types of contracts that would be more favourable to young people, the government needs to discuss this with social partners. And it turns out that, well, employers actually like the fact that young people are so flexible, and trade unions are afraid of a trade-off. So, a government is not really so sure if the reform is going to pass through. They say, "Well, no, if there is no agreement between social partners, we are not doing anything." And there you go; your initial idea is immediately put aside. So, young people are very often not represented by anyone and this, of course, creates a problem, because when you're implementing your reform and if you go to have social dialogue to establish the reform, there is rarely anyone who can speak on behalf of this group. So, there is an issue of representation I think, certainly, of young people in the social dialogue.⁹¹

Within this situation, only social NGOs promote the idea of a youth-specific policy strategy against unemployment, stressing the need to facilitate access of young people to the labour market while recalibrating social rights and benefits for young jobless at the same time. However, this position was not a very relevant one because social NGOs were not thoroughly involved in the employment related OMC process as were the social partners. This constellation of interests is true not only for the issues dealt before – such as job guarantees and labour market flexibilization – but also for other youth unemployment related problems, including reforms of education systems, social security benefits, and public employment services.

This constellation of actors and interests helps explain why the European policy initiatives in the realm of unemployment lack a consistent, explicit strategy to combat youth unemployment and why priority is accorded exclusively to training and education for young people. Apparently, it is easier to establish apprenticeship schemes than to change legal regulations in the field of labour market, education or social security. Moreover, it is quite difficult to address more structural issues and reform demands "because you would enter in all sorts of conflicts with many interests."⁹²

3.4 Policy Actors' Evaluation of the OMC/ EES

Our interview guidelines comprised questions regarding the procedural dimension of European policy initiatives in the realm of youth unemployment, and thus primarily questions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Here, we were interested in gathering our interview partners' points of views on the potential impact of European policy initiatives on national goals and policy measures. Moreover, we asked our contacts to assess the mutual learning aspects. Finally, we spoke with them about measures to improve effectiveness and quality of the OMC.

91. Interview with EPSU.

92. Ibid.

Following, we will present the findings of our interviews as a means to evaluate European policy coordination in the field of youth unemployment.

3.4.1 Main strengths and weaknesses named

In general, our interview partners evaluated the main instruments of the OMC – information exchange, transparency, and comparability – positively. Participants especially see the information exchange as one of the biggest advantages, making the idea of the OMC much appreciated. The Commission welcomes that the OMC:

[...] certainly pushes them [the member states] in particular directions. Of course, you can never say exactly what would have happened without the OMC. But it's very clear [that] since the employment strategy has been set up in 1997, member states are much more likely to be saying the same sorts of things in their employment policies than they were before. There is much more attention paid to the sorts of European identified challenges such as raising employment rates or the problem of activating policies. So, they're much more of a common view than it was before.⁹³

From the perspective of the Commission, the OMC offers a way to 'get a foot in the door' of the national policy arena.

The most recurrently named weakness relates to the fact that the EES rests on soft law mechanisms such as objectives, guidelines and recommendations, with the result that it does not have the means to control and sanction non-compliance. Hence, the entire process is based on the exchange of good practices, on peer learning, and cognitive convergence amongst the member states. For that reason, interview partners identify the most serious weaknesses of the OMC is the fact that "there is no legal requirement to do anything".⁹⁴ Because of lacking competences in this field, the EU is not entitled to set binding targets. This is true even for those aspects of the European policy initiatives that establish specific objectives and measures; for instance, the Youth Guarantee that stipulates that public employment services have to provide young job seekers a new start within four months: Member states would never accept being forced to adopt this measure.⁹⁵ Consequently, the method's effectiveness relies mostly on the pressure ("naming and shaming") exercised by EU institutions, member states, interest groups, or the media.

Finally, our interview partners refer to a further weakness, namely that "states are very reluctant to examine each other's policies in depth".⁹⁶ Member states certainly appreciate to engage in peer

93. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

learning, but “what is called multilateral surveillance, where member states actually are critical, constructively critical, there is very little of that. Member states don’t want to be criticised by others”.⁹⁷

In sum, we can conclude in line with previous research⁹⁸ that the OMC is primarily a source of ideas but less an institutionalised process that is able to develop specific recommendations or ensure and control compliance. This problem is aggravated by the observation above; namely, the EU strategy resides on vague and weak concepts – employability, flexibility, activation, and partnership –, all of which are ambiguous terms that can be interpreted in various ways and make it easy for member states to do just ‘business as usual’. Recent research has shown that “in most cases, the NAPs [national action/reform plans] amount to little more than a continuation of existing policy, with the production of the action plans simply being an exercise in dressing up existing practices as part of a European strategy”.⁹⁹ These criticisms raise the question of whether peer learning happens, as proposed by the proponents of the OMC.

3.4.2 Does peer learning work?

As noted above, peer learning is a tangible instrument of the OMC that strives to help enhance common target setting and policy priorities at the European and national levels. According to the core principles of the OMC, mutual learning facilitates dialogue amongst member states, enables actors to share good practices and compare results. As the Commission confirms, “Member states are certainly keen to cooperate in the sense of talking about problems they face with respect to youth unemployment, or on the whole they’re quite keen to share good practices”.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, peer learning within the OMC is able to influence the understanding and definition of policy problems and the dissemination of knowledge about policy instruments across member states. However, our interviews highlight that this is only one side of the coin.

Several weaknesses have been named in the peer learning process. First, policy actors argue that peer learning is not open but operates within a predefined agenda focussing on specific areas of action (e.g., apprenticeship schemes and modules to try to ease transition from school to work), to the detriment of others (e.g., contractual arrangements for young people or access to social systems). “So, if you would be at a different level of the reform, I mean changing the labour code, for instance, then I guess there would be less peer reviews around youth issues”.¹⁰¹ Second, interviews recurrently point to the fact that peer review is used by member states primarily as a possibility of political marketing, by highlighting their success stories and ignoring their failures and shortcomings. According to this criticism, the process is oriented far too much on policy outcomes and good

97. Ibid.

98. See, for instance, De la Porte et al., “Social Benchmarking”; Heidenreich et al., “The Open Method of Coordination.”

99. Eduardo Crespo and Pascual Serrano, “The EU’s Concept of Activation for Young People: Towards a New Social Contract?” (Unpublished, 2004), <http://aei.pitt.edu/id/eprint/1076>.

100. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

101. Interview with Support Team within the EMCO.

practices, which often prevents a serious discussion of policy effectiveness and a critical examination of current policy instruments and strategies:

I think the problem is, if it really worked to shared best practices, you should also share what doesn't work, what was the critics, who said this? I mean to have more honest [reviews], I think that would be much better. But instead, people just come and tell all the good intentions when they set some kind of skim up, but not what was the consequence.¹⁰²

3.4.3 Impact of the OMC on national youth policies

Even after in-depth analyses of policy documents and interviews, it is difficult to assess the real impact of the OMC on the member states' policies. On one hand, there seems to be a long-term effect on policy knowledge and political agendas. We can subscribe to a conclusion advanced by two other scholars, who highlight that the OMC has played an important role:

[...] in determining the direction of the debate on youth-related issues and in proposing new ideas and measures. In other words, it has an important socialising role, especially when it comes to developing a way of describing and explaining the problem of certain groups' exclusion from the labour market. For this reason, the Employment Committee may be seen as an ideational entrepreneur for the diffusion of strategic concepts.¹⁰³

On the other hand, the impact seems to be more limited when looking at national youth-related policies. Interview partners tend to agree that the OMC in the area of youth policy is a slow and little-targeted learning process with few visible results concerning national policy goals and instruments. This observation applies to the national reform plans in particular, as stated by one interviewee:

I think the annual country reports remain fairly general and don't have a great influence. For instance, some member states seem to be relatively unresponsive. I mean recommendations to improve public employment services in Italy have been issued for the past seven, eight, nine years. Public employment services in Italy still remain woefully ineffective.¹⁰⁴

Other interview partners have made similar observations. Scholarly writing tends to draw comparable conclusions, arguing that national reform plans use to present existing policy measures dressed up with EU vocabulary; that is, instead of unfolding a rich array of alternative policies reflecting the diversity of national conditions, they rather list policies within a common menu.¹⁰⁵ Our own analyses corroborates that these plans are written with the objective of reconciling national policies with current EU guidelines instead of developing new policies along the lines of EU recommendations and

102. Interview with Member of Parliament.

103. Pascual Serrano, "The European Strategy for Youth Employment: A Discursive Analysis" in eds. Blasco Lopez, W. McNeish, and A. Walther, *Young People and Contradictions of Inclusion* (Bristol, UK: The Policy Press, 2003), 89.

104. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

105. D. Mabbett, "Learning by Numbers? The Use of Indicators in the Coordination of social Inclusion Policies in Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy* 14, no. 1 (2007): 78–95.

guidelines and the lessons drawn from peer learning and other member states' experiences.¹⁰⁶ However, the possibility of more hidden and long-term effects on national policy reforms cannot be excluded.

3.4.4 Recommended improvements of the OMC in the realm of youth policies

Our interview partners made suggestions about how to improve the Open Method of Coordination in general, peer learning in particular. In first instance, there is a consensus that – in a short-term perspective – there are no alternatives to the OMC. Policy actors are aware that more EU competencies in the field of labour market and social policies would be an easy way out of the above-mentioned problems of implementation and compliance. Indeed, from the perspective of the Commission and Parliament, youth unemployment should probably be “tackled with a more communitarian approach”.¹⁰⁷ And the current debates about more European ‘economic governance’ as a reaction to the financial crisis of EU member states might increase the chances that EU institutions receive more powers in the field of unemployment policies, too.

In regard to the OMC, there is consensus amongst our interview partners that member states are willing to support a voluntary policy coordination approach,¹⁰⁸ particularly because they are “reluctant to cooperate if it looks like they’re going to be forced to do things”.¹⁰⁹ Peer learning is seen as an instrument with strong potential to improve European policy coordination. However, all interview partners generally agree on the need to ensure that peer learning is utilised more effectively within the OMC. They argue that comparability and transparency in particular should be improved by facilitating access to all necessary information concerning youth unemployment and related public policy measures at national levels.

Additionally, most recommendations sum up to a strategy of monitoring and peer learning that is more proactive, demanding, and systematic. For instance, the interview partners from the Commission and the EU Parliament suggest establishing a more rigorous assessment and monitoring framework within the OMC. This relates to technical requirements, such as more reliable indicators for monitoring purposes. Moreover, our contacts asked for a more “rigorous identification of weaknesses in member states”.¹¹⁰ Indicators should not be used merely in a general sense by setting benchmarks, comparing the outcomes, and getting a general view of the situation. Rather, member states should pay more attention to problems and take the chance to detect the real difficulties they face instead of talking themselves out of it. Therefore, the Commission proposes:

[...] a more determined Minister’s Council on Employment that is prepared to be more outspoken and perhaps more self-critical: The Employment Ministers are an effective

106. Interview with a youth unemployment specialist within the national government of Germany. 06.08.2010.

107. Interview with Support Team within the EMCO.

108. Interview with EAPN.

109. Interview with Commission, DG Employment

110. Interview with a member of the Support Team within EMCO.

counterweight; thus, a critical analysis of member states would be an effective way of running the OMC and the employment policy in Europe should actually improve substantially.¹¹¹

In sum, recommendations lean towards a more “tough governance on the EU 2020 strategies”¹¹² by putting more pressure on member states with additional ‘soft’ sanctions; that is, with a more proactive practice of ‘naming and shaming’ based on a more critical and rigorous analysis of member states’ political policies and measures. In addition to this, civil society organisations and the EU Parliament also propose to actively involve the civil society into the OMC in the area of youth unemployment to feed more information into the process, develop a more open agenda and critical debate, and to represent youth’s interests.

4 Civil Society Organisations and Youth Unemployment Policies

At the level of the European Union, a vital and diverse network of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been established in the fields of youth and (un)employment policies. These organisations issue documents related to social affairs and employment with reference to youth, and they interact amongst each other and with European institutions. They participate in hearings and act as public interest organisations representing the concerns of vulnerable groups of our population. When youth unemployment rates rose in reaction to the economic crisis in 2008, social NGOs were recognised as important intermediate actors within this policy field. Their activities are strongly welcomed by European institutions. In their last European employment observatory review on youth employment measures from 2010, the Commission pointed out that “the integration of youth can be best achieved through a multi-layer governance, encompassing national and EU levels and also local institutional actors”.¹¹³ The role of CSOs is also “identified as being important and the study calls for a closer involvement of such organisations in both the design and implementation of youth policies”.¹¹⁴ In sum, the role of civil society organisations is seen as crucial concerning advocacy and social services when problem-solving in the area of youth unemployment is at stake. In the following, we will describe how our interview partners describe and assess the role of European CSOs in the field of youth unemployment policies.

4.1 Role of European civil society organisations within the EU

Our interviewees stressed that European CSOs play a significant role as advocacy groups. On the one hand, they represent the interests of those policy targets (i.e., young unemployed), which are rarely actively involved in political deliberations and decision-making. On the other hand, they are able to improve policy outputs because they provide important points of view, new ideas, and additional

111. Interview with the Commission, DG Employment.

112. Interview with Member of Parliament.

113. [COM(2011)] SYSDM. European Commission.

114. Ibid.

information. The European Youth Forum (EYF) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) are the best-known and active NGOs in this field of action. They are part of the Platform of European Social NGOs and based in Brussels. Both organisations work together closely on issues such as the Youth Guarantee, high-quality internships, and a better access to social security with regard to youth (un)employment. They strive to feed their positions and claims into the current post-Lisbon process, with success, given the fact that the position of the European Youth Forum on the Youth Guarantee was included in two reports adopted by the European Parliament and considered by the European Commission within the Youth on Move initiative.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, our interview partners report that the “European Youth Forum was working with European social partners, other NGOs and also with the Parliament on an initiative to have a European quality charter on internships!”¹¹⁶ As a result, the Commission integrated a reference into the initiative Youth on the Move, stating that a European quality framework for traineeships was necessary to guarantee minimum standards of internships.

A second important role is intermediation. European social NGOs act as intermediate actors amongst young people at the local level and the European policymaking bodies. From the perspective of the EAPN, “The Commission doesn’t know what’s happening on the ground. How are they supposed to know? They’re also in an office in Brussels. Sure, there are delegations of the European commissions, but it’s not comparable to our local organisations which are really involved in social problems and confronted with those affected by the condition”.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the EAPN strives to give European institutions a better understanding of the ‘real’ problem to highlight social grievances and thereby influence the decision-making process. CSOs use their resources, such as “information from the ground, from all countries, to which the Commission normally has no easy access”¹¹⁸ to lobby for young people’s interests. At the same time, they help local civil society organisations seize information on European policies, funding possibilities, and administrative procedures, thus improving the organisational capacity of local CSOs in servicing the unemployed and representing their claims.

4.2 Involvement of social NGOs in structured dialogues

As previously mentioned, European institutions recognise CSOs as important policy actors at the European and national levels. Apart from issue-specific consultations, the EU institutions have engaged into the development of more structured forms of dialogue with organised civil society. Above all, we can refer to the social dialogue amongst the EU institutions, the employers’ associations, and trade unions. In the field of social NGOs, a less-institutionalised and structured ‘civil dialogue’ amongst EU institutions and social CSOs has developed, in spite of initiatives by the EU Parliament to establish a regular and generalised ‘civil dialogue’ in 2009.¹¹⁹ One important exception is provided by the field of

115. European Youth Forum (2011): Annual report 2010, http://www.youthforum.org/images/stories/Documents/DESIGN_EN_1_BLACKOK1.pdf.

116. Interview with the EYF.

117. Interview with EAPN.

118. Ibid.

119. [2008/2067(INI). European Parliament. European Parliament resolution of 13 January 2009 on the perspectives for developing civil dialogue under the Treaty of Lisbon.

youth policies. In fact, in this area of political debate the Council of Ministers has adopted a resolution in 2005¹²⁰ to establish a structured dialogue amongst EU institutions, member states, young people and their organisations to promote the “young people’s full participation in education, employment, and society”.¹²¹ European Youth Forum is formally included into this structured dialogue as the EU institutions’ primary partner. Since 2007, several rounds of debate have been launched, consisting of various consultations at the European and national levels. The thematic priorities have been identified in cooperation with the Council of Youth Ministers and the subsequent Presidencies of the Council.¹²² Since early 2010, the thematic priority for the three presidencies of the Spanish, Belgian, and Hungarian governments has been youth employment. This structured dialogue provides youth organisations at the European and national levels with various opportunities to bring the concerns of young people into the political debates related to employment and unemployment policies. On the European level, the European Youth Forum plays a key role, as it is formally included into the European Steering Committee for the structured dialogue and is actively involved in facilitating and developing policy consultation and debates.

Problems concerning the involvement of CSOs arise from the fact that the structured participation of social NGOs is limited to specific fields of action. Youth organisations are part of the ‘structured dialogue on youth’ and of the OMC on Social Inclusion – but *not* of the Social Dialogue and the employment OMC. Some NGOs have a quasi-institutionalised access to policy deliberations, while others lack this kind of status. In these fields of action, social NGOs have to rely on informal patterns of lobbying and advocacy; for instance, by contacting members of the European institutions directly or forming coalitions with other actors (e.g., trade unions). In this respect, “there are ways to influence the processes, but it’s nothing. From an advocacy point of view, there is no real dialog with the civil society in Brussels”.¹²³ The access to the process of consultation and decision-making depends on the willingness of the decision-making institutions to listen to these organisations because they are not obligated to consult social NGOs. For this reason, social CSOs demand a generalised, structured ‘civil dialogue’, a demand supported by the EU Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee.¹²⁴

Within the field of employment policies and amongst the members of the European Employment Committee, however, there are strong reservations regarding the further increase of participants and consultations. The representative of the Commission, for instance, praises CSOs as important actors

120. [2005/C 292/03] Council of the European Union. Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on addressing the concerns of young people in Europe – implementing the European Pact for Youth and promoting active citizenship.

121. [COM(2007) 498 final]. European Commission.

122. See [8664/11]. Council of the EU.

123. Ibid.

124. [SOC/365]. European Social and Economic Committee.; [2008/206, INI]. European Parliament. European Parliament resolution of 13 January 2009 on the perspectives for developing civil dialogue under the Treaty of Lisbon.

in relation to youth unemployment because of their local networks, but he does not support their involvement within the process. The long-standing and good relations with the social partners and social NGOs are lauded; however, contacts are described as time-consuming and not result oriented.¹²⁵ Consequently, “it is enough when they [the social partners] meet with the employment committee twice a year”.¹²⁶ Social NGOs are not considered relevant policy actors. This opinion is supported by the member of the Commission’s DG Employment:

Well, the EU and the commission in particular already support civil society quite extensively. I mean, my answer, really, I do not know what more can be done to make civil society better equipped. I think that it is something that has to come out of civil society or organisations itself. I mean they can't say there's a lack of funding. 'Cause there's plenty of money available.¹²⁷

Currently, the Commission does not intend to improve the formal participation of social NGOs in the employment OMC. However, some support for this demand is available from the EU Parliament, which has been promoting the idea of a structured ‘civil dialogue’. A member of this body proposed a stronger involvement of CSOs also in the field of employment policies; for instance, “by having longer speaker time at conferences”,¹²⁸ and making the formal structures more transparent.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Discussions about youth unemployment within the European Union have had a strong influence on the public perceptions and general knowledge about the situation of young people in the labour market. In this respect, the EU institutions have played a significant role, particularly through the European Employment Strategy (EES). They set the terms under which the problem of unemployment is discussed and establish indicators to quantify and monitor youth-related employment problems. Since 2005, the Commission has been consistently improving our knowledge about the situation of young people in the labour market by collecting data and describing their situation. Moreover, a number of member states received country specific recommendations, advising them to focus on pending issues and potential solutions to unresolved problems. For instance, recurrent issues were the need to improve transition from education to employment, increase effectiveness of employment services, foster integration of migrants, boost the quality and efficiency of education, and tackle the segmentation of labour markets.¹²⁹ Policies are on the move. Member states are developing a series of measures, and the EU institutions have committed themselves to advance and coordinate these reforms by developing youth-related objectives, guidelines, and recommendations (e.g., Youth Pact 2005, Youth Strategy 2009, the Flagship Youth on the Move 2010).

125. Interview with Support Team within the EMCO.

126. Interview with Commission, DG Employment.

127. Ibid.

128. Interview with Member of Parliament.

129. EMCO Report (2010).

Despite these developments, we conclude that there is still no integrated, systematic European policy on youth unemployment that considers the specific problems of this group and proposes a consistent course of action. One obvious reason for this situation lays in the limited competences of the EU in this field of action, which restricts regulatory initiatives to voluntary processes of policy coordination (i.e., the Open Method of Coordination, OMC). In fact, the EES is a coordination instrument that relies entirely on the readiness of member states to commit to stipulated objectives and guidelines. Moreover, the EES' own employment guidelines are general proposals, with the result that member states can easily stick to their existing policies and do 'business as usual'. Finally, the EES resides on a monitoring exercise that focuses the problem of youth unemployment only on a very abstract and general level, thus keeping policy deliberations and negotiations quite distant from the social reality of young unemployed people within the 27 member states.

Our interviews with key policy actors have revealed that the OMC and its peer learning processes have not been fully utilised within the EES. Indeed, the EES has some influence on the government's awareness and knowledge about the situation of young people within the labour market. Moreover, it seems to involve them into long-term processes of policy learning. Nonetheless, the impact of the EES on state policies and administrative practices at the national and local level seems rather limited. Moreover, disagreements and conflicts of interest amongst different political actors within the European and national arenas have hindered the formulation and implementation of a youth-specific policy strategy against unemployment. On the one hand, member states cannot agree on a well-targeted policy initiative due to differences in labour market regimes, social security systems and socioeconomic constellations. On the other hand, there is no agreement amongst social partners and civil society organisations about the necessity for a youth-specific policy strategy. Dissent exists also between trade unions and social NGOs, because the former voice strong reservations regarding a further flexibilization and liberalisation of labour markets for the sake of young job seekers. These conflicts of interests, amongst others, are responsible for the fact that the European initiatives and guidelines in the field of youth unemployment are a rather suboptimal compromise that does not have a strong impact on policy measures at the local level.

This general appraisal must be specified by referring to three thematic areas with specific recommendations.

Should there be a youth-specific European employment strategy?

So far, the EES is a policy strategy oriented to combat the general problem of unemployment, albeit more specific policy targets are identified. There are good reasons for this policy option. Proponents of the current European Employment Strategy warn against including too many specific target groups, indicators, and measures, complaining that the EES has grown incrementally too much. In this regard, there seems to be consensus for a lean, clear, manageable strategy. Those interested in the situation of young people, however – amongst them, young unemployed – criticise that there is no specific strategy on youth that considers the particularly high rates of exclusion and the specific problems of this group. They criticise that there is just a number of (disjointed) measures in various neighbouring

policy fields. Additionally, the EES and the most recent flagships (Youth on the Move and New Skills for New Jobs) privilege some areas of action (i.e., education), while putting less emphasis on others (e.g., social security, stable contracts, wages, and so on).

Both positions are plausible. Moreover, there is a trade-off between the parsimoniousness and consistency of a general employment strategy, and the specificity and effectiveness of policies targeting young unemployed. A way out of this dilemma could be to put more effort into the identification and coordination of target-specific policy initiatives within the EES. If youth unemployment is to be taken seriously, there needs to be a more coherent review and coordination process that ensures that the various priorities and measures – education, entrepreneurship, social inclusion, and anti-poverty – are integrated into a consistent policy approach. Hence, what is needed is a coordination of the various OMC processes (employment, social inclusion, youth) relevant to youth unemployment. This would help prevent the biased approach followed so far, which privileges the idea of education as the primary road to salvation for youth, migrants, older workers of women. The idea of ‘One Size Fits All’ might fail, however. Hence, a youth-specific strategy is necessary because the problem of youth unemployment is multidimensional, calling for a cross-sectoral approach of problem-solving.

Is the Open Method of Coordination working, and is peer-learning happening?

Our report has demonstrated that the OMC is generally appreciated by member states and has many advantages. However, weaknesses remain, mainly related to the voluntary nature of this process. These shortcomings have been well documented by scientific research and public debates and were replicated by our interviews. What can be done? On one hand, we might hope that the discussion about more European ‘economic governance’ will enlarge the competencies of the EU in the field of employment as well. On the other hand, it might be necessary to think about improving the OMC and its peer-learning exercise. This seems advisable. Our interviews have illustrated that there is a lot of monitoring and benchmarking going on, also in regard to youth unemployment, and participants evaluate positively the flexibility and openness of the process. But, paradoxically, little learning is happening. In particular, national governments prioritise the ‘selling’ of existing policies and measures, while the knowledge about other countries’ practices is very limited if not inexistent. If learning is happening, it seems to happen rather on the level of practitioners who are less under the pressure of ‘selling’ national policies and more interested in improving implementation. Moreover, learning is too oriented towards identifying good practices, discouraging countries to speak about problems, shortcomings, and imperfections. Finally, countries with a good standing in regard to policy performance (e.g., those with low unemployment rates) tend to lean back in peer learning, preventing a critical evaluation of their policies’ effectiveness. The unemployed in these countries do not seem to benefit from the OMC.

Thus, we recommend fully exploiting the potentials of peer learning within the OMC. This can be done in different ways: First, it can mean increasing the peer-learning exercise on the level of practitioners and less the one between government representatives. A first step into this direction is the proposal

within the EU flagship Youth on the Move to include experts from public employment services. Second, a more proactive practice of “naming and shaming” based on a more critical and rigorous analysis of member states’ political policies and measures is needed. Finally, we advise integrating civil society organisations more actively into these exercises because they are closer to the vulnerable groups at stake. Moreover, they are able to raise new views, insights, and pieces of information. Finally, they allow putting into practice a more critical review of national policies.

Are civil society organisations involved?

In general terms, there is a broad consensus within the European Union that civil society organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in regard to political advocacy and social services and must be involved in consultations and policy deliberations. However, there is disagreement about the extent of their involvement. Our fieldwork has illustrated that CSOs are integrated in some policy fields (e.g., the OMC on Social Inclusion, the structured dialogue on youth) but not in others. In particular, they are not part of employment-related consultations within and around the European Employment Committee. EU institutions are not concerned with increasing their involvement at the EU level in a generalised and structured way; a recurrently named reason for this is that the social partners are already institutionally integrated. Any other involvement would make consultations inefficient. However, the advantages of a stronger involvement overcome these technical and organisational disadvantages. On one hand, we have argued that CSOs have important resources to contribute, thus helping to improve the knowledge base of peer learning and the quality of policies considerably. On the other hand, a stronger involvement would help to reduce the existing gap between the EU and the local civil society, where the EU is a marginal reference point for CSOs.

6 Appendix – List of Interview Partners

Employment Committee (EMCO)

Commission

Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities DG
Head of Unit DG EMPL/D/2 (22.09.2010)

Employment Committee Support Team

Secretary to the Employment Committee
DG EMPL/D/2 (11.04.2011)

Germany

- Head of the Unit „International Labour Market Policy“ within the ministry of labor and social policy (20.10.2010)
- Interview with a youth unemployment specialists within the national government, who is not directly involved in European policy-making and monitoring/an independent participating national expert of a mutual learning programme - Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (06.08.2010)

France

- Interview with a youth unemployment specialists within the national government, who is not directly involved in European policy-making and monitoring/an independent participating national expert of a mutual learning programme (28.06.2011)

Italy

- Interview with a youth unemployment specialists within the national government directly involved in European policy-making and monitoring/an independent expert of a mutual learning programme (14.05.2011)

Poland

- Head of the Section for Labour Market Strategies of the Labour Market Department in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (05.11.2010)
- Labour Market Bureau of the Voluntary Labour Corps – Interview with a youth unemployment specialist within the national government, who is not directly involved in European policy-making and monitoring/an independent participating national expert of a mutual learning programme (05.11.2010)

Sweden

- Head of the Section for International Division Ministry of Employment (26. 04.2011)

Switzerland

- SECO Chief of Active Measures (12.10.2010)

European Parliament

- MEP Greens/SF (05.10.2010)

Social Partners and Non-Governmental Organisations

- ETUC – European Trade Union Confederations (Youth Coordinator) (18.01.2011)
- EPSU – European Federation of Public Service Unions (Policy Officer) (22.11.2010)
- EAPN – European Anti-Poverty Network (Policy Officer) (18.01.2011)
- EYF – European Youth Forum (Policy Officer) (22.11.2010)

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