

IN SEARCH OF SUSTAINABILITY IN TRANSFORMING YOUTH POLICY

EXPERIENCES FROM MY GENERATION THEMATIC NETWORK

BY ROBERT ARNKIL

LEAD EXPERT OF MY GENERATION THEMATIC NETWORK

Young people in Europe – and beyond – are not just disillusioned about their life prospects – they are angry and ready for action, which has already boiled over in many countries.

At the beginning of the My Generation URBACT project one of the first workshops was held in Patras in January 2009. At that same time there was a wave of unrest and riots across Greece. As the project ends we have seen the resurgence of protest in Greece, the rise of the young generations in the Arab countries, and the anger of the *indignados* in Spain. The young want to be heard, and they want solutions.

So the youth issue is very much on the European agenda. What can we learn from the experience of My Generation, concerning this set of challenges? The reasons behind the present unrest of the young generations are complex, and so indeed are the necessary solutions. It would be unreasonable to assume that a three-year project, however successful, could give many answers. Nevertheless, My Generation has some important messages on what could be done with the young, and what cities could do with their policies and projects to have a better connection to their youth.





The starting point of My Generation

The **My Generation** URBACT project started in November 2008 and ended in the Summer 2011. It was a learning network on good practices in connecting to the young generation, to design better youth policies and build tomorrow's cities with today's youth. The partners in the project were Antwerp, Belgium; Birmingham, UK; Gdansk, Poland; Glasgow, UK; Gothenburg, Sweden; Patras, Greece; Riga, Latvia; Rotterdam, the Netherlands; Valencia, Spain; Warsaw, Poland and Tirgu-Mures, Romania.

The partner cities in **My Generation** had similar challenges, but also their own acute problem areas. A common challenge was the disengagement of a great number of young from local communities, education and employment. This had led, in varying degrees to the deterioration of neighbourhoods, gang-related violence, ethnic strife, rising drop-out rates and high youth unemployment. This complex set of challenges is mirrored by the fragmentation of city policies and efforts trying to deal with youth issues. The young were often treated as a source of problems and not as partners in the solutions.

At the beginning of the project it was obvious that some cities had already done a lot to engage with the young, whereas for some investment in this direction was new. Also the strengths and weaknesses varied. Some cities were innovative in reaching out to young in trouble, some others in finding new solutions in education, and some in connecting education to employment and business. But nobody had the perfect solution, covering the entire "landscape" on youth policies. A comprehensive youth policy needs good practices in reaching those hard to reach, good practices in building on informal skills of the young, and to connect these better to formal education and good practices in connecting education to employment and entrepreneurship. Addressing this youth policy landscape, a new "ecology" is needed, starting with real involvement of the young, and connecting their activities to community work, public services, education and the business community. **My Generation** set out to do this.

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A change of paradigm is needed in youth policies

Three main problems plague both projects and policies in Europe, and this is particularly true concerning youth: target-group thinking, fragmentation and low sustainability. As a target group, the young are left in a passive role, treated not as a vital resource, but as a problem to be solved. This seriously undermines the effects, credibility and sustainability of results. Whereas the life-situations of the young would call for a comprehensive approach, uniting community and social work, education, employment, entrepreneurship, police-work and others into a whole, they are often fragmented and operating in silos. There is a lack of cooperation and limited combining of resources – including the resources of the young themselves to start with. No wonder various youth initiatives, however promising they seem with temporary project support and resources, often exhibit low sustainability. Reinventing the wheel starts with new projects.

Target group thinking is the result of the still-prevailing, overly rationalistic, supply-driven "planning and designing paradigm", where some groups of more or less wise specialists identify a problem and a "target group", then design a project, and call in stakeholders to run it. Very often the last stakeholders to be called to run, not to speak of design, the project are the people supposed to benefit from it. They end up in a passive and token role, which severely undermines the effects, sustainability and transferability of results. This kind of approach is of course not typical only for youth projects, but has been the prevailing way a good deal of working-life development has operated for decades¹. It was thought that with expert, specialist scientific and political design, some kind of perfect or better solution must be "imported" to the workplaces, more or less like a commodity. Over years, in a painful way, it turned out that all solutions must be adapted through a local learning process, and all actors have an equally important role in finding solutions – the workers, managers, administrators, consultants and scientists.

A case in point is what has also happened in innovation policy: First it was thought that the cooperation between science (generating knowledge), public administration (creating funding and cooperation) and the industries (generating wealth and practical solutions) was the “engine” to find new solutions. Today innovation is in the middle of a paradigm change towards *open innovation*, emphasising broad cooperation in innovation and user-centric innovation policy. An era of linear, top-down, expert driven development, production and services is giving way to different forms and levels of coproduction with consumers, customers and citizens. This is also challenging the public authorities and the production of public services². Coproduction is equally important in developing the next generation of youth policies.

First lesson from My Generation: the young as genuine co-creators

My Generation set out to do things differently. Participating in URBACT and **My Generation** made it possible to take steps in transforming youth policies and actions towards a new culture of co-creation. This is the key to all the other conclusions.



At every stage and in all activities **My Generation** has asked: How are the young themselves engaging in our project? How could this be improved? In order to foster

good contact and co-creation with the young, **My Generation** had to transform the way workshops and meetings were run, and what kind of communication and products were used and made: they had to be active, creative and use all the senses. And there is no harm in meetings being fun, too!

So **My Generation** insisted from the very beginning that every city had young people on board at every stage, including the Local Support Groups. In URBACT the Local Support Groups were supposed to be multi-actor/multi-stakeholder “miniature hubs” of youth policy coordination, and a potential element to work towards a new ecology of youth policy – and better future sustainability of project results. This is of course only potentially a new beginning, but as it turned out, even this seemingly small change turned out to be quite revolutionary, in fact a major cultural change, in the cities.

But how do you do that? How do you get the young on board? This challenge led **My Generation** to the other key learning point and message: In order to be able to get the young genuinely aboard, the whole “ecology” of the action, the way things were done, the “mode” in which the project was run, needed to be transformed.





Second lesson: Transform the ecology of engagement and action

It is no big secret that the young do not respond well to the kinds of workshops and activities churned on the basis of the still-prevailing rationalistic “planning and design” paradigm. Come to think of it, who does? This mode produces seminars running in monologue, workshops and meetings crammed with Powerpoint presentations by experts, decision makers and project planners. There is a huge gap from this mode to reach out to disengaged young, whose life might be in a mess, and who are suspicious of the bunch of helpers hunting them down and suddenly wanting to do them good.

We need to transform our entire “ecology of engagement”, or to be more precise, we

Transforming youth policies and actions towards a new culture of co-creation.

need to tune in to the change that has already occurred, and is in fact the more natural way of people to communicate and learn. We need to use all channels and modalities of human communication and action: to use dialogue, movement, dance, music, pictures, video. This is precisely what we have done in **My Generation**. We have emphasised real life stories, youth ambassadors, mediators, champions and youth role models, championing young talent and creativity. At every stage and in all activities we were asking: How could we enrich our working methods, so that it facilitates engagement?

One important “vehicle” to tap into the resources of the young, related to transforming the “mode” of workshops, was emphasising the importance of informal knowledge and skills. Many young people have great difficulties in relating to the learning environment provided by schools, and end up with miserable and useless diplomas, if they do not drop out altogether. There is a need to transform the education system, which should be better geared to new ways of learning. It is a message to build all kinds of opportunities for informal, “life-based learning” skills to emerge and flourish, and connect this better to formal learning. As it turns out, young people with bad school histories

can be very creative and talented in many things. They just need encouragement and a chance to show it and build on it. Community work, education and the business world need to be transformed to better embrace these “life-based skills” – be they in music, dance, sports, computers, making films and pictures, using social media or wherever.

This is at the very core of the **My Generation** message. **My Generation** provided an opportunity to the partner city groups to *experience* what a dialogical, engaging and co-creating way of working actually IS, and not just to hear presentations about it³. This experience can then be taken back home, and build upon, adapting it to the local circumstances. The most important aspect of this experience is having the young genuinely aboard, but a good second is the engagement with the local communities, public officials, educational, business and scientific communities.

This dialogical experience is, we believe, more important than the actual solutions derived within a short project time span. After all, the starting-points of the cities vary in project experience and policy environments, so everybody has its own relevant “zone of proximal development”. But every city could learn something about better engagement, dialogical experience, and challenge itself to move ahead, and adapt to the changing circumstances.

This idea of transforming the ecology of engagement is of course not an isolated phenomenon concerning only youth policy. It is very much in line with the development of the understanding of learning and development in very different fields of activity, ranging from knowledge management, workplace development and innovation, concepts of learning organisations and recently the “digital explosion”, producing a hybrid environment of learning. It is at the centre of the new paradigm of social innovation that is emerging. The common thread running through all these is a new appreciation of experiential, or “tacit” knowledge, and the need to better connect this tacit knowledge into explicit, formal knowledge. The key here is to provide “learning spaces”, where connecting socially, expressing and articulating yourself (not only by words, but by other means like movement, gestures, pictures, metaphors), connecting to already existing formal knowledge, and finally experimenting yourself, *creating* something, trying out yourself, form a continual, transformative learning process⁴.

This is precisely what **My Generation** has tried to tap into: providing learning spaces, where people engage, express themselves, are connected to broader knowledge and also create something themselves, trying out the concepts and understanding emerging in the learning journey of **My Generation**. As an example: instead of having lectures on what young people think in a particular city, in one of the **My Generation** workshops the young were given a crash course by professionals on making videos. Then the young were assigned to go out in the streets and make creative videos of young people – what they think, how they see the city. These were fed into YouTube. In other words the young learned useful skills (making videos, group-work, using the Internet) and at the same time expressed themselves (and the interviewees) creatively.

Because of the prevalence of the rationalistic “planning-design” mode in project thinking, **My Generation** has made a special effort to pay enough attention to the “underdog”: the informal, creative and tacit. At the end of the day, it is of course about striking a good balance between the more cognitive and expressive modes.

Third lesson: Transform the ecology of the youth policy Cityscape

So we need to have the young as co-creators, and this calls for a transformation of engagement and the way we do things. But can this be sustained?

Nobody can solve complex societal challenges alone. The key idea of **My Generation** has been about establishing better contacts in the cities between the actors in the “youth cause”, particularly the local communities, various forms of education and the business community. All the workshops, in different ways and different degrees, were multi-actor workshops with young, professionals, city people, entrepreneurs, politicians. At every stage and in all activities we have asked: Where do we need better contacts? How can **My Generation** act as a catalyst and a platform for better contacts? What about the decision makers? Where do they want to make a new breakthrough?

Often youth policies are fragmented or missing completely, so youth activities in particular are left separated. Cities try, with various projects, to strengthen neighbourhoods, activate



Nobody can solve complex societal challenges alone.

young people, combat drop-out from education or unemployment – but separately, often unaware of each other, and wasting already scarce resources. What is worse, the various measures – reaching out to disengaged young, education and employment are not connected, there is lack of actors and good practices to go over the borders, to build bridges, to travel with the young across the difficult transitions as a friend, a coach, a role model. So a success in, say, getting young activated, is wasted, when the next steps (and the transition help) – building skills and finding employment – are missing. The young become even more *indignados* with this approach, than at the start!

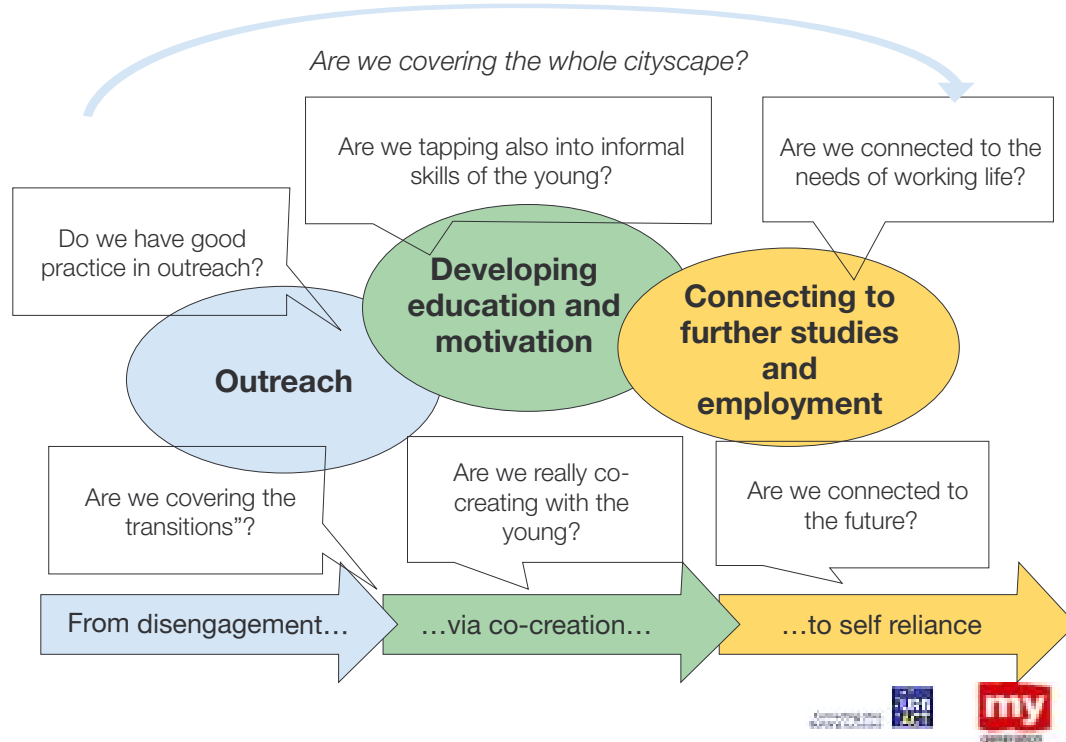
The **My Generation** cities had very different situations and policy landscapes to address these challenges. Some cities had a lot of experience in reaching out to young people in trouble and transforming that to positive activities, whilst some cities were only taking first steps here. Others had a lot of experience

in building on the informal skills of young people, and providing hands-on coaching, where for some this was new. Others, again, were experienced at the employment and business end of active transitions towards a self-reliant young life, where some cities had not connected the business community to these activities.

But nobody had the complete and perfect solution. This is where the **My Generation YOUTH POLICY CITYSCAPE** concept, a way of looking at the total “ecology” and resource needed for an “ideal” city youth policy coverage in terms of good practices, was useful. In the picture an example is given of one version of the cityscape with a few key questions concerning youth policy.

The key idea of My Generation has been about establishing better contacts in the cities between local communities, education and the business community.

MY GENERATION YOUTH POLICY CITYSCAPE



YOUTH POLICY CITYSCAPE as a tool for developing city policies and sustainability

Outreach, Education, Transition to working life, tapping into informal skills, having the young as co-creators, connecting local communities, the educational community and the business community – all constituted the “ecology” of youth city policy, as understood in **My Generation**, based on its learning journey. We started calling this a YOUTH POLICY CITYSCAPE, which could then be used to identify good practices in the various areas of this “ecology”, and also to identify missing links, actors and practices.

No city has a perfect coverage of the CITYSCAPE, and all cities can improve and learn from others. To reach better results, cities need to cover the entire youth policy CITYSCAPE. This means they must have good practices in Outreach – reaching out for young in trouble, in Education – like tapping into informal skills - and in connecting to Employment – like providing work practice, apprenticeship and coaching for entrepreneurship.

What has already been achieved?

Rotterdam’s example – also using its experience as European Youth Capital – has been inspiring, both in the calibre of the young people who have come forward but also through the innovative ways of ensuring that the youth voice is heard. The concept of the Youth Council for example, has emerged as a key structure for attracting young people and providing them with influence in their city. Many other **My Generation** cities have gone down this route and set up Youth Councils. So in terms of sustainability, Youth Councils and Youth Mayors are a fruitful element.

Trust is at the heart of altering relationships and obtaining sustainability, and another way of building this is to embed services within young people’s communities. Using resources to recognise young people’s skills – informal and formal – and to create pathways into professions is another effective model we have seen. In Antwerp the Youth Competence Centres lie within communities where many young people have been switched off by formal education. Using credible role models, and drawing youth in through media and sport Antwerp – and cities like Birmingham and Glasgow – are making those initial

connections to build upon. So another key element in sustainability is putting in place structures in and close to the communities.

In Outreach and community engagement we have the experience of many cities using sport, arts and events. From Birmingham we have Street Games and World Worth Living (coaching and empowering in small groups), from Riga new Voluntary Organisation cooperation, from Gdansk use of Skate Parks in engaging with young people otherwise out of the city’s radar screen. In transition to Education and challenging and transforming education we have the experience of Youth Competence Centres, C-stick of Antwerp (making a lively CV on a computer stick, also making informal skills “visible”) and Community Schools of Rotterdam (addressing drop-outs and providing a second chance to complete education). In mediation, guidance, and connection to employment and business we have the experience of guidance centres and one-stop-shops, companies run by young entrepreneurs acting as brokers and go-betweens, Young Business Incubators in schools, and Chambers of Commerce reaching out to young entrepreneurs and providing them guidance.

All these experiences and activities – Youth Councils, Youth Mayors, Youth Competence Centres, Community Schools, Street Games, Young Chambers of Commerce, Young Business Brokers, Young Business Incubators – and many others – are already in many instances *permanent* structures and activities in the cities, so they have much more potential for sustainability than just temporary projects. What is more, these ideas are cross-pollinating each other, so that the cities are completing their YOUTH POLICY CITYSCAPES. The various good practices need to be connected better to provide an as seamless chain of active transitions as possible. But, as said, nobody yet has the perfect YOUTH CITYSCAPE in place. All European cities are welcome to fill in the gaps! ●

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(4) Nonaka, I., Toyama, R. and Hirata, T. (2008) *Managing Flow – A Process Theory of the Knowledge-Based Firm*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.



MORE INFORMATION
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