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HOW CAN CITIES SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH SOCIAL INNOVATION?

BY EDDY ADAMS AND ROBERT ARNKIL

Cities are full of opportunities for young people. However, transition to adult life is not always a smooth process and the current youth unemployment crisis threatens to increase the number of disengaged young people in our cities. This article draws upon the URBACT workstream "Supporting young people through social innovation" evidence of the ways in which cities are responding. In particular, it explores the concept of social innovation and the opportunities this can offer in relation to stimulating civic participation amongst the young.

The challenge of youth in the cohesive city

The European Commission's report "Cities of Tomorrow"[1] creates a picture of the ideal European city model: cohesive, integrated and open in outlook. However, it is a model under threat. The report refers to the increasing number of residents disengaging from mainstream society, often a consequence of feeling disconnected and disempowered. Rising unemployment is a driver here, but so too is disaffection with the political system, as the recent turbulence in parts of Europe has shown. This sense of disengagement affects many of those who feel vulnerable, exposed and unrepresented.

The risks created by growing numbers with no stake in society have been discussed in relation to the concept of a *Precariat*[2] (Standing, 2011), which is very much identified as an urban phenomenon. Underlining this risk of detachment in Cities of Tomorrow, Sir Peter Hall described a potential dystopian outcome where cities will see:

"a development of closed subcultures with fundamentally hostile attitudes to mainstream society, governed by different ideologies and social codes ranging from religious (or quasi religious) to gangsterism (and overlaps between these)." (Cities of Tomorrow 2.3.2)

The risk of a lost generation

Rising youth unemployment rates across much of Europe have prompted fears of a "Lost Generation". Although there is an uneven picture across the EU, few cities have been immune. In the member states with more stable economies, youth joblessness is rising in many cities – doubling to 6.7% in Copenhagen and to 13% in Berlin. In southern cities the pain is more acute, for example in Barcelona where 35% of young people are jobless.

In many parts of Europe, the most highly qualified generation face record levels of joblessness, despite years of study. The *Indignados* protesting in Spain's cities assert the exposure of a big lie. "Stay in school, study hard and you will have a good life" was the mantra of their parents and teachers. Yet for them, Spain's best-educated generation, the reward has been 50+% rates of unemployment. Many may now ask…"what's the point?"

A chronic challenge

Yet, the youth crisis facing cities is not new. Data shows[3] that even during the years of growth, a persistent minority of young people were out of the labour market and disconnected from mainstream society. This suggests deep structural problems relating to youth transitions to adulthood.

Two groups present a chronic challenge for cities: the first are those young people – often products of the most disadvantaged families – who are on the radar of most public services: Education, Police, Social Workers, Youth workers. The second group is at the other end of the spectrum – almost invisible – encompassing the young homeless, the mentally ill and the illegals; marginalised and without access to social and medical support, they challenge the notion of the cohesive city.

In a period of intense austerity, many cities have reduced services supporting the most vulnerable people. In the context of youth, this often means cutting education budgets, slashing numbers of front-line support staff and reducing welfare subsidies. In this period of the most extreme need, many cities have implemented their highest levels of budget reductions in a scenario that has frequently been likened to a *perfect storm.*

City choices and the role of social innovation

What can cities do in response to this situation? Some are continuing as before, only with fewer resources, pursuing a policy of *cutback management.* However, a growing number see the need to respond more dramatically. In some cases, radical change involves a top-down approach. For example, in the Berlin District of Marzahn, a new Mayor has introduced a commitment to reduce youth unemployment to 0% between 2013 and 2016. Under this controversial *Work First* proposal, everyone under the age of 25 will have to be in training or employment to receive welfare support.

At the other end of the spectrum, momentum is building around cities looking to work in new collaborative models with customers, communities and a wider range of service providers – very much in line with the URBACT model, which underlines the partnership approach[4]. In addition to reduced public budgets, the drivers behind this include a growing commitment to user-shaped service design, particularly around support for the most vulnerable residents.

The umbrella term "Social Innovation" is increasingly used to describe this eclectic and organic range of developments, although interpretations of this vary. The most widely accepted definition comes from the BEPA report for the European Commission, which states that:

"Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words they are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society's capacity to act.[5]"

The European Commission is strongly promoting social innovation as an important component in Europe's recovery. The design, development and implementation of new services to address our biggest challenges – ageing population, lack of jobs, youth alienation – is widely identified as a high priority.

The Commission's commitment is evident in a number of ways that will provide financial opportunities for cities across Europe. The Draft Structural Fund Regulations indicate that, for the first time, there will be resources assigned for social innovation through both ESF and ERDF in the 2014-2020 programmes. Alongside this there are ambitious research and development initiatives aimed at stimulating social innovation[6] across Europe.

How can we help cities take advantage of these opportunities? A good starting point might be to provide examples of ways in which cities are stimulating new service design and delivery models relating to disengaged youth.

The city response

Social innovation involves a process of exploration and collaborative development. There is no single template that can be transferred between cities. However, our workstream activity suggests that there are shared features between cities that are involved in pushing this change agenda. As our work progresses, these may evolve, but at this stage we can see three important shared characteristics.

1. New civic leadership

It is too early to claim that a new leadership model is emerging in cities. However, in relation to some of the most pressing social issues, signs of change are evident. Although the "command and control" mindset remains alive, it is increasingly called into question. There is a growing acknowledgment that the public sector cannot do everything, and that this is a time to listen and to generate new ideas.

Social innovation involves a process of exploration and collaborative development.

The case of Barcelona

Barcelona has actively engaged young people (via the Barcelona Youth Council – CJB) in the development of a new youth plan. This has been a challenge with 35% youth unemployment, and limited prospect of short-term improvement. Within the process, public authorities have frankly shared their limitations in relation to the labour market. A distinctive plan is emerging as a result, with a strong emphasis on promoting physical and mental health through sport – as well as an active support programme for the parents of unemployed young people.

Record of public sector interventions with one family (jointly produced with the family) (courtesy Swindon Council)

In Swindon, UK, analysis of the local authority's work with troubled families showed that resources could be used more effectively. The snapshot indicated multiple interventions from across municipal departments with low impact on the clients. It also showed the limited proportion of staff time spent working directly with clients. For example, in a case study with a 12-year-old child it emerged that only 14% of worker time was spent face to face with the client. The vast majority – 74% of the time – was spent on administration.

Starting point was recognition of the need for change, good use of intelligence and a willingness to take risks and experiment.

The analysis and interpretation of this data was an important starting point in service redesign. This process involved clients and staff members and resulted in a transformed service. But the starting point was recognition of the need for change, good use of intelligence and a willingness to take risks and experiment. It is also notable that external advisers – *inspiring outsiders* – played a key role in challenging assumptions and stimulating the small leadership group.

2. Mobilising people as resources

Where will the new ideas come from that will enable us to use our collective resources more effectively? We have found that they come from a wide variety of sources and that to have one good idea you have to generate many, as Linus Pauling said "the best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas and throw the bad ones away".

Two rich sources of ideas are customers and staff. Recognising this, and creating space to meaningfully involve them in service redesign is an important starting point. Civic leaders can mobilise this collaboration with *valued insiders.*

Under the old model, people who used services were rarely perceived as *customers.* A consistent message emerging from this work is that in traditional service models the "end users" were often passive recipients of services, which was disempowering and inefficient. We heard from cities that are aiming for transformative collaboration with their clients and who are seeking to achieve a shift from "consumer to contributor".

In the words of Michael Young, founder of the Open University and the Young Foundation,

A shift from "consumer to contributor".

"people are competent interpreters of their own reality". Historically, an over-reliance on professionals led to this being overlooked. Progressive cities are looking to rebalance this, which involves building customer confidence and capacity as well as using appropriate methods to encourage their active participation.

In several of the city inputs, the key function of the "trusted broker" plays a pivotal role in establishing these trusted relationships – both with customers and with other organisations. The person specification for these central figures is that they:
▶ Have strong empathy and credibility with clients.
▶ Have personal resilience.
▶ Are emotionally literate.
▶ Are comfortable working in diverse settings.

Expert witnesses noted that people with these characteristics were often recruited from outside the public sector. Another important point was that they often occupied temporary roles required for particular work phases. Like the scaffolding around a building, once the structure is solid this support can be removed. In organisational terms, this implies a degree of flexibility and responsiveness not always associated with municipal structures.

The case of Rotterdam, former Lead Partner of the URBACT My Generation network and current Lead Partner of the URBACT My Generation at Work network[i]

From Rotterdam, we heard about another example of building trusted relationships with disadvantaged young people.

The organisation Home on the Streets (Thuis op Straat) has young street workers going into tough neighbourhoods to make pancakes with the local youth – as an initial point of engagement.

This requires a high degree of bravado, and the approach relies upon having streetwise confident young people who have credibility and respect from kids in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Home on the Streets also provide an insight into another aspect of the shifted relationship with clients.

First of all, rather than adopting a deficit-model, and seeing them as people to "be fixed" the organisation focuses on the talents of the young people they engage with.

These may be smart young people who have made bad choices.

So, Home on the Streets focuses on their assets – the entrepreneurialism of the drug-dealer and the leadership skills of the neighbourhood bully.

These talents might have emerged differently in other environments.

Rather than be given a standard service, Home on the Streets expects young people to articulate and negotiate their support needs.

Finally – and most important – this is not a "something for nothing" service. Young participants have to make a commitment in order to gain support in return.

For example, the organisation offers them part-time volunteering opportunities that harness their talents and in return for 100 hours input they provide financial support enabling the young people to continue their education.

(i)   URBACT My Generation network: http://urbact.eu/en/projects/active-inclusion/my-generation/homepage/
URBACT My Generation at Work network: http://urbact.eu/en/projects/active-inclusion/my-generation-at-work/homepage/

The key function of the "trusted broker" plays a pivotal role in establishing these trusted relationships – both with customers and with other organisations.

The second group of *valued insiders* are employees. Here, we are particularly interested in the role of publicly funded staff in stimulating and supporting this change process.

A recurring theme in our witness discussions was the importance of "bringing staff with you". This was seen as being particularly important where there is a limited culture of innovation and change. As a consequence, staff may be more resistant and may feel threatened giving up power and allowing customers greater say in the way resources are used. This is part of a wider process to promote innovation and culture change in large publicly funded environments. As we have already noted, city leaders have a key role to play by explicitly giving staff permission to generate ideas and look for improvement opportunities.

From the Copenhagen Job Centre we heard about approaches to embed this inside the organisation. One of these is to nominate "change agents" within all of the teams in the organisation and to look for collaborative models between staff and external professionals from wider disciplines, described in the next page.

3. Building new delivery partnerships

To effectively support the most disadvantaged urban youth, cities must enable all of the relevant partners to play to their strengths. This was one of the key messages emerging from the URBACT My Generation network, led by the City of Rotterdam. It is also an important part of the work being led by Nantes, Lead Partner of the URBACT PREVENT network[7], which seeks to mobilise parents to help prevent early school leaving. However, ensuring that actors complement one another requires a coordinated approach. The need for this has come through strongly in our evidence from many of the witnesses. Yet, at the same time, cities also have to be fluid and responsive.

Riga, partner in the URBACT My Generation network, provides a good example of the balance between coordination and responsiveness. Like many cities, it has struggled with high levels of youth unemployment during the economic downturn. Although additional resources were transferred to welfare budgets, it has been tough for many young people. At the height of the crisis, a small group of young people started gathering to play street basketball on a piece of waste ground near the city centre. Over time, this gathered momentum, attracting bigger numbers, and many of the participants were young people who generally avoided public services.

One of the three founders – an ex basketball pro – invited other professionals to come down. As word got round, participant numbers continued to jump. Within three years the founders had formalised their activity through an association, secured space and financial support from the local authority and expanded into other street activities – including BMX and street dance. Although not part of the "official" structure, Ghetto Games provides an important first point of engagement,

Home on the Streets workers warming up

The case of Copenhagen, Host city for the URBACT 2012 Conference

A different example of new collaborative work comes from Copenhagen. There, the Jobcentre has established a working relationship with anthropologists, with a view to improving client services. These professionals have been commissioned to look at specific issues.

One of these has been the physical space in city Jobcentres, as perceived by young people. As a result of this, the organisation's facilities have been redesigned.

The other interesting aspect of their work has been client profiling to determine those most likely to incur sanctions.

Under the Danish "Rights and Duty" model, clients are penalised if they do not undertake agreed tasks. This research is trying to anticipate these problems so that sanction rates can be reduced.

and they can signpost young people to other services as and when appropriate. This example also shows how a centralised local authority structure can still engage with bottom-up approaches.

Conclusions and next steps

Current rates of youth unemployment in some parts of Europe are widely perceived to be dangerous and unsustainable, with significant proportions of young people affected. Those cities with higher proportions of young people are presented with two choices: adopt a short-term approach to weather the storm or pursue an agenda of reform and innovation with longer-term objectives.

URBACT's focus is on sustainable and integrated urban development. This promotes a collaborative model where stakeholders solve problems together. New partnership models are evident in several of our city examples. These include an enhanced role for customers as well as front-line staff in shaping services. In addition, we see an acknowledgment of the need to look beyond "the usual suspects" in terms of generating new ideas and delivering effective services.

From the My Generation network we see cities that are transforming their relationships with young people. The Local Action Plans from cities like Antwerp, Riga and Rotterdam reflect this[8].

Effective leadership also emerges as one of the keystones. Within this we have identified several components: a commitment to listening; giving permission to all stakeholders to be part of the change process; a willingness to take risks and to hold risk for others; and recognition of the time and space required to develop real innovation together.

These may be the initial steps in a significant – and long awaited – shift relating to the way public services are evolved and combined resources mobilised. Under the third round of URBACT projects, cities will have an opportunity to push this agenda further, for example through PREVENT, Smart Cities and My Generation at Work.

In the meantime, as our workstream progresses we will gather more evidence to share with our audience, both during the final conference and in the eventual outputs from this work. ●

(1) http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/citiesoftomorrow/index_en.cfm
(2) The Precariat combines the terms "precarious" and "proletariat" to describe an emerging vulnerable class on the margins of mainstream economy and society
(3) Dietrich Hans, Youth Unemployment in Europe, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2012; Bell D and Blanchflower D, Youth Unemployment; Déjà vu? IZA DP 4705 (2010)
(4) http://urbact.eu/en/header-main/get-involved/local-support-groups/
(5) http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/pdf/publications_pdf/social_innovation.pdf
(6) For example, DG Research and Innovation's Call for Proposals to establish Social Innovation Incubators http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/page/capacities;efp7_SESSION_ID=qnkQQjbTv1psGKZnknxCw222SQDXxbCnsNn0P24vpm8JWshynQq8!-598335810?callIdentifier=FP7-CDRP-2013-INCUBATORS
(7) http://urbact.eu/en/projects/active-inclusion/prevent/homepage/
(8) http://urbact.eu/en/projects/active-inclusion/my-generation/our-outputs/

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