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How to build a Reflexive Policy Making process with young people

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Introduction

In the last couple of decades simultaneous changes in the structure of labour and housing markets as well as the demographic makeup of societies have created new patterns of inequality. Inequalities in educational attainment, labour market precarity and affordability issues on the housing market imply new social vulnerabilities for young people, with which traditional welfare services often struggle to cope. Several factors play a role here.

First of all, most welfare states were developed at a time when employment could serve as a guarantee against poverty, but this paradigm is challenged by today's more precarious labour conditions.

Secondly, in the last decades, many national and local governments have implemented cuts to public spending, which lead to more restrictions in the access to services and benefits, and curtailed local and national governments' abilities to meaningfully intervene in the functioning of the market. This is especially visible in the housing market, where the decreasing share of public housing has been accompanied by growing housing costs.

Thirdly, traditional welfare support often only addresses one domain of the recipient's life, such as employment or education, without regard for the complex connections between these different domains. Also, the increasing differentiation within the target group of young people may result in a mismatch between the often standardized solutions that are offered, and the heterogeneous needs of this target group.

Last but not least, it is important to acknowledge that the problem is broader than just the supply side. Even when support is available, young people do not always use this. They may not be able to find the support they need, or they may not trust the initiatives that are offered.

To sum up, it can be concluded that there often is a large gap between the 'system world' of policies and institutions, and the 'life world' of the lived experiences and needs of the young people themselves.

The UPLIFT project

The UPLIFT project aims to understand the patterns and trends of inequality across Europe, focusing on young people (aged 15-29) in urban areas. Through a range of methods, the project seeks to understand how individuals experience and adapt to inequality, and – together with communities in four locations – aims to co-design a policy tool to involve young people in the creation, implementation and monitoring of policies seeking to reduce inequalities. The UPLIFT team is made up of 15 international partners including academic partners, independent research organisations, social workers, local municipalities and others.

The project uses existing data sets to understand the different factors contributing to socio-economic inequality particularly in the domains of housing, education and employment in 16 different urban areas across Europe. These have been selected as research sites for their range in economic potential and redistributive environments. At eight of these sites the partners conduct further research, investigating individual experiences of inequality thorough interviews and workshops with both young people and adults. In a final four cities, Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Tallinn and Sfântu Gheorghe, the project explores policy co-creation. Together with the UPLIFT researchers, young people in each of these four areas design potential policy solutions to address their experiences of inequality. Through Reflexive Policy Making, UPLIFT aims to develop a new, sustainable, participatory policy co-creation process, where young people are actively contributing to policies that directly influence their life chances.

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The essence of Reflexive Policy Making

Within the UPLIFT project, we have developed an innovative participatory approach of Reflexive Policy Making with young people that can potentially bridge the gap between 'system world' and 'life world'. This approach has three main tenets:

1. Policies are made with the target group (based on a deep understanding of their needs and strategies) and not for the target group. This means that young people are actively involved in the creation, development, implementation and evaluation of new policies and tools.

2. The voice of young people is expressed by so-called Youth Boards. These Youth Boards are inclusive and representative groups of young people that are structurally involved in the co-creation process. Together with the institutional stakeholders, the Youth Board co-creates and agrees on a shared Reflexive Policy Agenda. The Reflexive Policy Agenda contains a set of proposed policy interventions that fall under the competences of the stakeholders involved, and that aims to address the issues that the young people are struggling with.

3. The policy makers and service providers that participate in the co-creation process need to be committed to take the voice and input of the target group seriously. Ultimately, this should result in the creation of new and durable collaborative structures that should prevail beyond the UPLIFT project.

Added value of Reflexive Policy Making

The Reflective Policy Making approach can bring significant advantages to all parties involved, and to the overall effectiveness of the policy-making system.

For young people, the process can be a positive and empowering experience, as they get the opportunity to voice their concerns and contribute to shaping policies that affect them directly. Through the co-creation process, young people can acquire new skills, build confidence, and gain a better understanding of how institutional actors and systems work.

Institutional stakeholders can benefit from being more open to alternative and co-creative policy-making approaches. They will learn to listen more attentively to the real-life experiences of young people so that they can take these experiences into account in the policy-making process. This can lead to more tailored and effective youth policies that address issues that may have been overlooked in the past.

Additionally, the collaboration between institutional stakeholders may improve as a result of the Reflexive Policy Making approach. It can foster greater collaboration and understanding among stakeholders and establish a shared comprehension of relevant youth issues at the local level. This common ground can, in turn, lead to the creation of local coalitions to address these issues.

Reflexive Policy Making can also create energies around the needed changes. Even if the need for change is already known by many local policy implementers, the voice of young people can bring it to light and generate action.

It is important to note that these benefits take time to materialize and that co-creation processes should not be treated as one-off initiatives. Instead, the start of a Reflexive Policy Making process should be viewed as the first step towards a permanent shift in the mind-set of policy-makers and institutional partners and towards more fruitful interactions between stakeholders and their target groups. Although upfront investment is required, in the long run, the Reflexive Policy Making approach is likely to lead to more inclusive and sustainable policy outcomes, increased stakeholder engagement, and enhanced legitimacy and acceptance of policies.
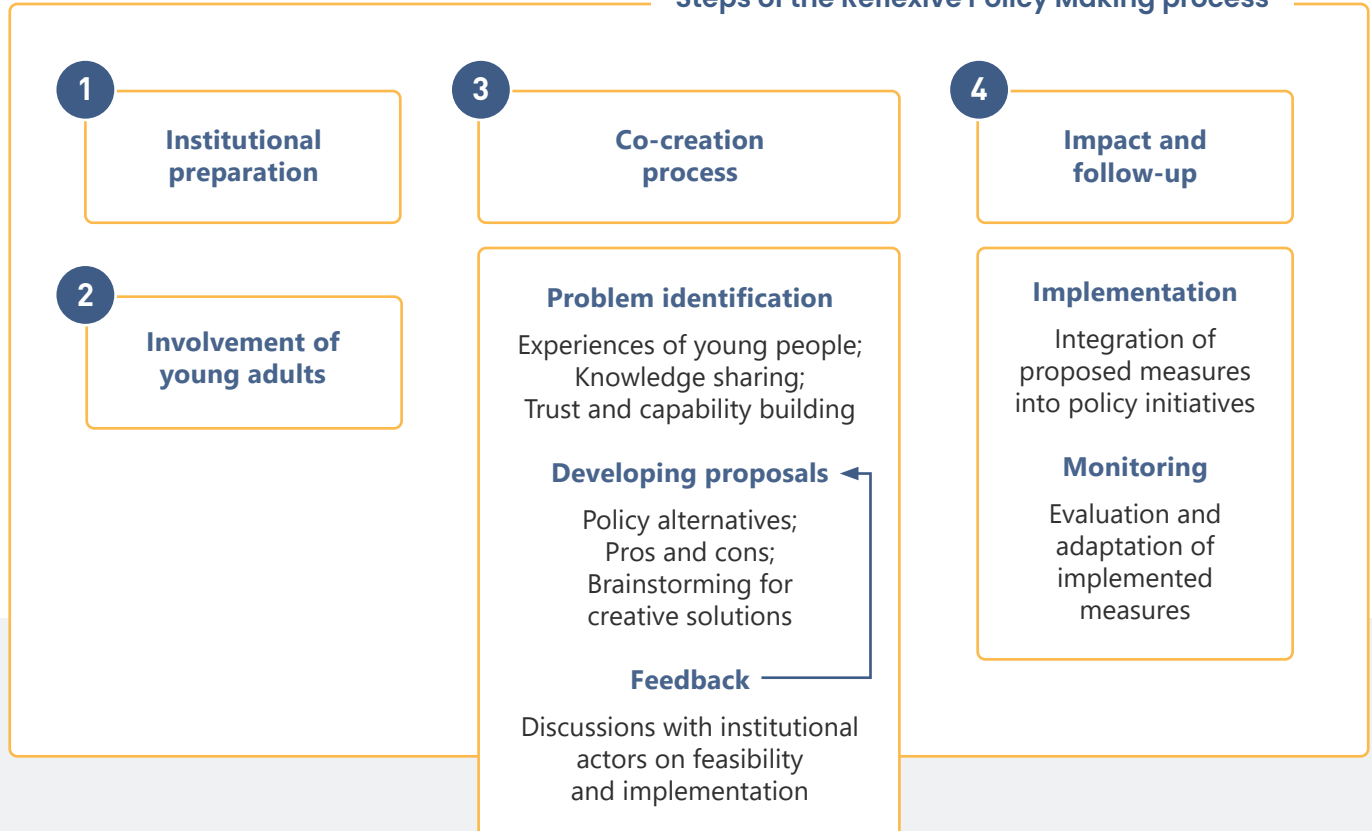
What is this policy brief about?

Our approach of Reflexive Policy Making has been tested and applied in four different cities: Amsterdam (The Netherlands), Barakaldo (Spain), Tallinn (Estonia) and Sfântu Gheorghe (Romania). Together with local implementation partners and UPLIFT researchers, Youth Boards in each of these four cities have designed potential policy solutions that address their experiences of inequality. In this process of Reflexive Policy Making, four different phases can be discerned:

1. **Institutional preparation;**

2. **Involvement of young adults; recruitment of a Youth Board;**

3. **Carrying out the actual co-creation process;**

4. **From co-creation outcomes to policy implementation: impact and follow up of the co-creation process.**

In this policy brief, we provide relevant guidelines and recommendations for each of these phases, based on our evaluation of the UPLIFT co-creation process in the four different cities. These guidelines and recommendations are meant to inspire and provide support to governments and/or service providers that want to start a similar co-creation process. In the UPLIFT project, we have applied our approach of Reflexive Policy Making at the local level and we have focused on young people as a target group. However, in principle, our approach can also be applied at other levels of governance (regional, national, EU), and with other target groups.

Steps of the Reflexive Policy Making process

1 Institutional preparation

2 Involvement of young adults

3 Co-creation process

Problem identification

Experiences of young people;
Knowledge sharing;
Trust and capability building

Developing proposals

Policy alternatives;
Pros and cons;
Brainstorming for creative solutions

Feedback

Discussions with institutional actors on feasibility and implementation

4 Impact and follow-up

Implementation

Integration of proposed measures into policy initiatives

Monitoring

Evaluation and adaptation of implemented measures

Phase 1: Institutional preparation

Policy co-creation is a long and intensive process that requires a careful preparation from the side of the stakeholders that initiate it. With regard to this preparation, the following recommendations can be given.

1. It is advisable to concentrate Reflexive Policy Making processes on policy domains where the target group experiences significant challenges, and/or where there exists a substantial disparity between the target group's "life world" and the institutional actors' "system world." Before the co-creation process actually starts, in-depth interviews with professional stakeholders and members of the target group may be used to get a deeper insight into this (potential topics for Reflexive Policy Making are also listed in Deliverable 3.4 of UPLIFT − Transferability Report - to be found at: https://uplift-youth.eu/comprehensive-deliverables).

2. During the co-creation process, institutional stakeholders should be willing to set aside their usual way of working and acknowledge that young people are experts in their own needs and can make meaningful contributions to policy development. They should understand that young people participate in order to be heard and find solutions to their problems, rather than to simply provide innovative ideas for local institutions. By clarifying this from the outset, a relationship based on trust can be built, which is crucial for a successful collaboration.

3. Before the co-creation process kicks off, it is advisable to make an action plan in which the roles and contributions of the different actors, and the scope and the expected outcomes of the co-creation process, are clearly defined. Upfront clarity about these aspects is important because they have significant implications for the way in which the co-creation process is organized and the role that the different should take in this process.

4. Set-up a 'local co-creation team' that coordinates, monitors and evaluates the implementation of the action plan. This team should consist of representatives of the most involved stakeholders, and preferable also of young people.

Phase 2: Setting up a Youth Board

Establishing a Youth Board requires careful preparation and consideration of several aspects, including the recruitment process, the composition of the group, gender sensitivity, and vulnerability level of potential participants. To address these factors, the following recommendations should be taken into account.

1. The size of the Youth Board should not be too large (about 10 people), in order to foster an easy cooperation among Board members and allow space and time for all participants to express their opinions.

2. To ensure that the Youth Board represents a variety of perspectives, it is important to strive for a gender balance and sufficient diversity in terms of ethnic background and type of problems expressed. To ensure a diverse and heterogeneous Youth Board, it is recommended to involve a wide range of organizations, groups, institutions, and individuals in the recruitment process. The more varied the recruiting organizations are, the more diverse the Youth Board is likely to be.

3. Tailor-made strategies may be necessary to reach specific demographics or groups that are outside the reach of institutional stakeholders and/or NGOs (e.g. snowball methods, recruitment in specific locations, advertisement in social media groups).

4. Vulnerable young people should be provided with support and guidance to help them effectively communicate their needs and desires during the co-creation process, particularly if they have not previously had opportunities to have their voices heard.

5. Long-term commitment from Youth Board members can help to ensure continuity in the co-creation process. However, since the process can be long and time-intensive, it is important to allow Youth Board members to be flexible in their participation. In relation to this, it is recommended to develop a strategy for replacing members who drop out, in order to ensure that the co-creation process can continue without interruption.

6. If Youth boards, Youth parliaments or Youth councils already exist, it is advisable to connect the co-creation activities to these existing institutions.

Phase 3: Carrying out the actual co-creation process

When organizing and conducting the actual co-creation process, there are various issues that need to be taken into account: trust building and group forming, capacity building, enhancing creativity, interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders, and evaluation. Recommendations with regard to all these aspects are provided.

Trust building, capacity building and enhancing creativity

1. A successful Youth Board requires trust, respect, safety, and internal cohesion among its members. Without these elements, members may only express non-controversial opinions, which can hinder the co-creation process. Ice-breaking and getting-to-know-each-other activities, such as excursions and social events, should therefore be organized in the early stages of the co-creation process to enhance trust building and group forming. These activities should be adapted to the needs and desires of the Youth Board members.

2. Having a 'youngster facilitator' can be beneficial in bridging the gap between the Youth Board and institutional partners, and in generating trust among Youth Board members. This facilitator (preferably of the same age group as the Youth Board members) should have a good understanding of the language and culture of young people, as well as that of the institutional partners. Youngster facilitators should be able to serve as a liaison between the two groups, helping to facilitate communication and collaboration.

3. Just as trust building, capacity building is crucial for a fruitful co-creation process. Youth Board members may need to learn communication, listening, presentation, and reflection skills, as well as gaining sufficient knowledge about the 'system world' of institutions and policies. These skills will help them during the co-creation process and also in their personal lives.

4. It is beneficial to include institutional stakeholders in the capacity building of the Youth Board. Institutional stakeholders can provide valuable insights into the 'system world' and policies that the Youth Board may need to understand. Moreover, capacity building activities can also be used to facilitate direct contact between Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders (e.g. mini-internships, joint lunches, visits to institutional stakeholder's premises). This may smoothen their interaction during co-creation and feedback sessions later on in the process.

5. Capacity building is not only crucial for Youth Board members but also for institutional stakeholders. To make the co-creation process successful, policymakers and professionals may need to change their mind-set and become more open to the opinions and ideas of young people, especially if they have always worked in a top-down manner. Training and expectation management sessions may be helpful in this regard.

6. The fields of Participatory Action Research and Design Thinking identify many relevant techniques and tools that can be used to enhance creativity (e.g. mind maps, working with personas etc.). Furthermore, the key to achieving high levels of engagement is to incorporate group work and make discussions interactive. Within group work, it is important that every participant has the opportunity to express their opinion and actively contribute. Effective and empathic moderation, pairing people up in small groups, or using live polling platforms as a starting point for discussion, may be helpful in this respect.

7. Apart from applying appropriate techniques, it is also important to create an attractive atmosphere around the co-creation process, for example by providing catering and the possibility for social encounters around the sessions. Depending on the context and the applicable regulations, monetary and non-monetary rewards may also be considered.

Empowering exercise about creating an ideal city. Source: Sfantu Gheorghe team

Interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders

A successful co-creation process relies on a fruitful interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders. However, this interaction can be challenging due to the inherent power imbalance between the two groups. To ensure that young people's voices are heard and valued the following recommendations can be given.

1. In sessions where young people and institutional stakeholders meet, it is important to have moderators who are neutral and objective towards both groups. This helps to establish trust and credibility and ensures that the co-creation process is fair and inclusive. To achieve this, it is recommended to work with moderators that do not have a direct stake in the policy-making process or the implementation of policies.

2. In order to prevent institutional stakeholders from dominating discussions in a co-creation process, the moderators may ask them to go into a "listening mode". This means that institutional stakeholders are asked to listen to the experiences and proposals of the Youth Board without the opportunity to react immediately.

3. Since institutional stakeholders often use a different language than young people, communication issues may arise. To prevent this, it may be necessary to review and adapt the written communication of institutional stakeholders to suit the language of young people. In case of verbal communication, the facilitators (particularly the "youngster facilitator") could act as "translators" during sessions that involve both institutional stakeholders and Youth Board members.

4. To ensure that the co-creation process is effective and the proposals of the Youth Board are taken seriously, it is advisable to have institutional stakeholders from both the operational level and the executive level present. Stakeholders from the operational level can assess the practical feasibility of proposals while stakeholders from the executive level have the power to decide on implementation.

5. In their feedback to the Youth Board, institutional stakeholders may refer to the impossibility to change current systems and policies ("the system is like this, such are the rules"). However, this should not be used as an excuse not to take action. Also small and subtle changes that do not require a systemic change, such as changing the attitudes of professionals or providing better information, may have a significant positive impact on the life chances and well-being of young people.

Evaluation

Co-creation with young people is a relatively new activity in most contexts, and it is important to evaluate the process in order to learn from possible mistakes. Therefore, it is crucial to think upfront about sound evaluation methods. With regard to evaluation, the following recommendations can be given.

1. Formulate clear goals before the start of the co-creation process. Quantitative (survey) and/ or qualitative research methods (focus groups, interviews) can subsequently be used to assess whether these goals are met.

2. Create a clear work plan before each co-creation session, preferably with involvement of the Youth Board. This work plan could contain information on the topics to be discussed, the objectives of the meeting and the methods or tools that will be applied. After the session, an evaluation could take place among the facilitators, again preferably with participation of the Youth Board. To what extent did the work plan work out as anticipated? And if this is not the case, which 'learning points' for the future can be extracted from this?

3. In order to create a good empirical basis for subsequent evaluation, it is important to carefully monitor the whole co-creation process by making notes and/or recordings of all the sessions.

Barakaldo Youth Board.
Source: Barakaldo team

Phase 4: From co-creation outcomes to policy implementation

The process of co-creation and Reflexive Policy Making will ultimately result in a so-called Reflexive Policy Agenda (RPA). This RPA contains policy suggestions that intend to improve the well-being and the life chances of young people, and it is agreed upon by both the Youth Board members and the institutional partners. With regard to the formulation of the RPA, the following recommendations can be given.

1. When discussing and assessing the content of the RPA, a good management of expectations is crucial. Youth Board members need to be aware of the fact that changing policies is a time-intensive and complex process, where many different interests are at stake, and that true system or policy change is hard to achieve. Institutional stakeholders should not primarily expect innovativeness or 'out of box' thinking from the Youth Board. Youth Board members define problem solutions based on their own experiences and visions. These solutions may definitely be 'innovative', but innovation should not be the main criterion for judging the propositions of the Youth Board.

2. It is important to recognize that the RPA is not a legally binding, democratically agreed-upon policy agenda. Instead, it is the outcome of a participatory research process, rather than of local political decision-making. Transforming the RPA into legally binding and democratically agreed-upon policy documents is a challenging endeavour since it requires transitioning from the realm of research to the realm of local political decision-making. The dynamics involved in the latter may differ significantly, with longer implementation horizons, elections that may result in new visions and decision-makers, and the consideration of available budgets in balancing the added value of the RPA against other interests. Nevertheless, we believe that a well-defined dissemination strategy and the upfront involvement of key decision-makers can significantly enhance the likelihood of a successful RPA implementation.

3. One of the fundamental principles of Reflexive Policy Making is to continually evaluate policy development to ensure that policies effectively respond to the needs of the target group and take into account possible societal changes. This necessitates that policy monitoring and evaluation by the Youth Board are an integral part of the policy implementation strategy.

4. Since policy implementation, and therefore also policy evaluation, has a different time horizon than policy co-creation, many current Youth Board members may not be there to evaluate the policies they have co-created. To ensure that young people remain involved in future policy development and evaluation, a structural embedding of the Youth Board in the policy making process is needed.

5. In many instances, the implementation of the RPA will be an incremental and often also an insecure process. In such a context, pilot projects are a good way to kick off the implementation activities. The purpose of a pilot project is to assess the viability of the Reflexive Policy Making approach, to identify and address potential issues and to gain feedback from Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders. Pilot projects cost relatively little money and time and can be a good way to lay the foundation for a broader implementation of the RPA.

Learn more about how the UPLIFT Reflexive Policy Making process was implemented in four specific locations and gain a detailed insight into their implementation by looking at the Guidebook on developing the Reflexive Policy Agenda at https://uplift-youth.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/D4.8-Guidebook-on-RPA.pdf

Youth Board members present their RPA to the Amsterdam alderman for housing production.
Source: Amsterdam team

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Imprint

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