

# Young people and youth policies in Spain in times of austerity: Between juggling and the trapeze

Article presentat a la revista: *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*.

*En proces de revisió per a l'acceptació final (abril 2013)*

PERE SOLER  
(Corresponding author).

University of Girona. Pl. Sant Domènec, 9. 17071 Girona (Catalonia, Spain)  
[pere.soler@udg.edu](mailto:pere.soler@udg.edu) +34972418027

ANNA PLANAS

University of Girona. Pl. Sant Domènec, 9. 17071 Girona (Catalonia, Spain)  
[anna.planas@udg.edu](mailto:anna.planas@udg.edu) +34972418027

CARLES FEIXA

University of Lleida. Pl. Victor Siurana, 1. 25003 Lleida (Catalonia, Spain)  
[feixa@geosoc.udl.cat](mailto:feixa@geosoc.udl.cat) +34973702137

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the situation regarding young people and youth policy in Spain via the parameters of the magic triangle linking policy, research and action: 1) The situation of young people in Spain today: some indicators are highlighted regarding the main challenges and opportunities for young people, with references to the so-called “Ni-Nis” (neither studying nor working) and the movement of the “outraged” youth that occupied the streets of Spain’s major cities in May 2011; 2) the current approaches adopted by public youth policies in Spain and limitations and difficulties encountered by the government in attempting to meet the demands of young people; 3) social work with young people and professionals involved in youth policies. In the last section we conclude with some open questions and proposals for the immediate future.

## Keywords

Youth research. Youth policies. Youth work. Crisis. Austerity. Spain.

# **Young people and youth policies in Spain in times of austerity: Between juggling and the trapeze**

## **1. Introduction. Youth policies in times of austerity: oasis or mirage?**

In this article we wish to present and discuss the situation of young people in Spain today using the parameters of the magic triangle linking research, policy and action. Before presenting some empirical Spanish data for these three areas, we introduce the European and global framework, which includes references to conceptual, political, legal and institutional issues. In the conclusions, we come back to this theoretical debate, arguing that in times of crisis and austerity youth policies move between the game of juggling and the high risk of the trapeze.

In November 2009 the Council of the European Union adopted the Renewed Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field, a resolution aimed at guiding European youth policies for the following decade. The general aim outlined in the preamble was to promote the professional integration of young people, with the main challenge being that of overcoming the “economic turbulence” that began in 2008 (one year before approval of the Framework), which at the time appeared more cyclical than structural in nature. The underlying idea is based on the principle of generational equality, understood as the struggle against all forms of discrimination on the grounds of age (a principle equivalent to the gender, ethnic or racial equality that guided social policies of previous decades). However, it soon became clear that implementing the law would be somewhat complex as its adoption coincided with the spread of the crisis, with the consequent devastating effects on youth policies. The events that took place in different European countries in 2011, those most affected by the crisis (Greece, Portugal, Spain) and others seemingly less vulnerable (the UK), have demonstrated not only the relevance and timeliness of the resolution, but also its limits (Feixa, 2011). The resolution has as its goal what European youth researchers refer to as OASIS, from its English acronym (Howard Williamson, personal communication; Coussée, Williamson & Verscheldel, 2012).

O: Opportunities, in education and employment

A: Access to sport and participation

S: Solidarity between the generations

IS: In Society

In short:

OASIS. Opportunities for Access and Solidarity In Society

The idea behind this concept is that oases (places in the middle of the desert with water and vegetation) are very much needed in the lives of the most vulnerable and excluded young people (who are increasing in number) and can only be provided by public policy measures. Australian sociologist Ani Wierenga argues that “oases” are needed where the stakeholders on the youth agenda – those people capable of influencing decision-making – can meet politicians and young people from youth organisations. The Flemish youth work specialist Filip Coussée suggested at a European youth work conference that work with vulnerable young people (a central component of the new European strategy on youth) always runs

the risk of dehydration or even dying of suffocation under the weight of targets, indicators and expectations (in some ways a form of privatising or co-managing youth policies). There is therefore a constant need for rehydration (regular supplies of water), which can come from the contribution of youth work (community work with young people) and international cooperation in the youth field. From this perspective, youth policies are seen as an oasis of peace in the midst of the crisis, the opportunity to recover on the long journey towards personal autonomy and social emancipation. They are also a place for self-reflection and meditation – of research – which can be used to better plan the trip. Provided, of course, that the oasis is not a mirage – something you see in the distance but never reach – where young people are deceived through a postmodern form of bread and circuses (travel, study, consumption and entertainment – sex, drugs and rock’n’roll). The scenario may be depicted as follows:

### Figure 1. The OASIS of Youth Policies

The theoretical foundation of the new legislative framework is the notion of the “Magic triangle”, or the necessary synergies established between government, civil society and academia, a notion developed by authors like Lynne Chisholm, Filip Coussée and Howard Williamson (see Chisholm, Kovacheva & Merico, 2011). In the Resolution it is worded as follows: “Cooperation between relevant authorities, youth researchers, young people, youth organisations and those active in youth work should be promoted”. At the centre of the triangle are the *young people*, individually or organised in groups. In the first vertex are *public authorities*, responsible for formulating, legislating and implementing *youth policies*. In the second vertex is *academia*, whose main function is to generate *knowledge* regarding young people; it has ceased to be an external actor and become a subject with direct involvement. In the third vertex is *civil society*, responsible for intervention in the world of young people, via youth organisations and professionals whose role is to implement youth *action*. Exchanges take place between the three vertices; they are not always symmetrical, but are necessarily multidirectional, in which everyone learns from everyone else. When these exchanges are numerous, fertile or positive, the result is to strengthen areas for youth participation and to strengthen youth public policies. When these exchanges are scarce, sterile or negative, the *magic triangle* can become a *Bermuda Triangle*, where young people go from being the subject to the object, becoming invisible or disappearing symbolically and physically from centre stage: youth policies suffer cutbacks or are subordinated to security policies; research is reduced or feeds on media stereotypes; social work with young people survives on the basis of volunteering and austerity (Oliart & Feixa, 2012).

### Figure 2. Youth Policies: Magical Triangle or Bermuda Triangle?

The aim of this article is to analyse the effects of the crisis and austerity policies, focusing on one of the European countries most affected by this situation: Spain. We will attempt to present some data and reflections for different areas on the effect of both the crisis and the orthodox policies being used to address it (the so-called austerity policies) on the three vertices of the triangle (research, policy and youth

work), and on the three administrative levels on which said policies are deployed (local, regional and national).

## 2. Youth research as a metaphor for the crisis: *Ni-Nis* or *Indignant*?

The effects of the crisis on the Spanish youth can be summarised in two archetypes created by the media and converted into a target of research. First, the *Ni-Nis*,<sup>1</sup> young people who supposedly *neither study nor work*: a metaphor for the dramatic consequences of the state of unemployment some young people find themselves in, swallowed up by the Bermuda Triangle of the crisis. On the other hand, there are the *indignant*, young and not so young activists from the 15-M movement, who in May 2011 occupied the main squares of most Spanish cities in protest against the political class, opposing the *Ni-Ni* image with that of *yes-yes-yes*: that of the young person who as well as studying and working – though in unstable conditions – still has time to commit to finding a way out of the crisis side-by-side with their peers. In both cases, the social problems such notions demonstrate was first denounced by activists (unionists or militants); secondly the media diffused it as a label; and scientific research came third, providing data and critical interpretations of the phenomenon.

### 2.1. From *Mileuristas* to *Unemployed*

Prior to the official outbreak of the international financial crisis (in autumn 2008) some studies had demonstrated the social vulnerability of large sections of young people in terms of employment, education, housing and parenthood. Despite being one of the European countries with the highest rates of economic growth, despite the housing boom and high immigration rates experienced since the mid-1990s, this had not translated into improved educational or employment opportunities for young people, their access to housing and emancipation from the family, or delaying the age of marriage and parenthood. This was summarised in a generational stereotype: the so-called *mileurista*<sup>2</sup>.

The most visible effect of this situation is the evolution of youth unemployment. As data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) show, unemployment rates were already high before the start of the crisis, especially for adolescents (from 16 – legal working age – to 19), it remained at around 30% until 2007; for young people (20 to 24 year-olds), it remained at around 20%; for young adults (25 to 29 year-olds) while for the adult population (25 to 54 year-olds) it remained at around 10%; for the general population it remained below 10% at all times. From 2008 to 2012 the rates increased exponentially, albeit unevenly by age group. For adolescents it rose from 39.41% to 72.65%; for young people aged 20 to 24 it increased

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<sup>1</sup> *Ni-nis*: Neither Nors, Spanish version of the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

<sup>2</sup> *Mileurista*: “Thousand euro earner” – the well-qualified young person earning less than 1,000 euros a month and therefore with difficulties to emancipate themselves from their parents). This idea was first proposed by a young female student in a letter to the editor published in *El País* (a mainstream Spanish daily newspaper) in 2005, and was then taken on as the emblem of a generation (Freire, 2006). With the onset of the crisis, rather than *mileuristas* young people began to be called *nimileuristas* (translation: not even earning a thousand euro a month)..

from 20.40% to 49.13%; for young adults aged 25 to 29 it increased from 13.60% to 32.19%; and for the general population it increased from 11.34% to 25.03%. In short: in 2012, two in ten adults, three in ten young adults, five in ten young people and seven in ten adolescents are unemployed. Of course, there exist differences due to gender, migration and geography that we cannot elaborate here; the same is true of underemployment.

Figure 3. Evolution of unemployment rates by age group (Spain, 2005-2012).

[UPDATE excel sheet: Figure 3]

## 2.2. *The Ni-Ni Generation*

The model of an unemployed, family-dependent youth in a precarious economic situation came together under the label of the Ni-Ni, originally a formula for denouncing mismatches between the school system and the labour market. In 2005, the youth wing of the socialist union UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores- Workers General Union) presented the report *Els altres joves* (The other young people), based on data for Catalonia from the first half of the decade and reporting a high percentage of young people who had left the education system but had not found work. The active and inactive unemployed who do not study, when added together, represent around 10% of the total youth population. In 2008, the union updated its report, showing that the situation had gone from cyclical to structural. Although the percentage of youth unemployed had decreased slightly, the percentage of inactive young people who were not in training had risen from 2% to 9%. In total, the Ni-Nis had come to represent 14.30% of the population aged 16 to 24 (that is, one in six young people neither studying nor working). For the authors of the report, this demonstrated serious deficiencies in the education and labour systems, ranging from school drop-out to temporary employment (UGT, 2008). The report's conclusion was blunt:

We believe that this group of young people who neither study nor work represent a significant proportion of human potential being wasted, and that links need to be urgently established between the worlds of education and employment in order to provide them with a coherent professional pathway which allows them to find quality employment. (UGT, 2008: 14).

Although the report did not mention Ni-Nis, the category became a media label, inverting the axis of blame: instead of the education and labour system, the young people themselves were to blame for this situation (if they neither studied nor worked it was because they were lazy and led a comfortable life maintained by their families or the welfare state). According to Esping-Andersen (2002), the Spanish social welfare system can be classified among the more 'conservative' southern European regimes, with the family occupying the main position and public policy playing a secondary role. In times of crisis like those we are seeing today, the role of the family is awarded even greater importance.

It was the journalist José Luis Barbería, in an article published in *El País* in June 2009 (coinciding with the start of the crisis), who popularised the label "the Ni-Ni generation", no longer referring to individuals who find themselves in this particular situation but the entire youth population of the time. The climax came with a reality TV show broadcast in early 2010 by a private channel (*La Sexta*), which, under the

title *Ni-Ni Generation*, turned the label into a category. The programme featured a series of ill-mannered and vulgar young adults who spent all their time doing nothing. But the label also began to be used in a political sense, as a denunciation of the generational inequality suffered by the Spanish youth in the labour market, politics and the media<sup>3</sup>. Finally, it was implicitly assumed by the government: in 2010, the Autonomous Government of Catalonia introduced a programme specifically aimed at this group (the *SUMA'T* programme), initially disseminated via a website called “Generació Sí+Sí” (Serracant, 2012).

Following the media noise came the time for academic research. In 2011, the Youth Institute published a comprehensive report, commissioned by the National Bar Association of Doctors and Graduates in Political Science and Sociology, under the direction of Lorenzo Navarrete, with the significant title “Deconstructing Ni-Ni. A youth stereotype in times of crisis”. As stated in the introduction, the category can be considered a caustic metaphor for the crisis, a widespread image which has been imposed intensively, deformed, strongly stereotyped, crudely justified, frantically discussed by countless parents, educators, experts, subjects who are supposedly protagonists and, above all, journalists, interviewers and media commentators (Navarrete, 2011: 12). After a review of the main European and national statistics, research towards a critical reading of the LFS data proposed a more precise definition, according to which the Ni-Nis actually represented under 2% of the Spanish youth population. The study was completed with a qualitative analysis based on four discussion groups with young people, allowing the unravelling of the “Ni-Ni” experience and how this corresponded to the educational and employment experiences of young people themselves.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.3. *The Indignant Generation*

The other side of the Ni-Nis coin are the young Indignant, also known in Spain as the 15-M movement. The former nickname refers to the title of a book by Stéphane Hessel (2010), a veteran French human rights activist, considered to have inspired the movement. The latter refers to the date of the occupation of the Plaza del Sol in Madrid (May 15, 2011). From the beginning the Indignant presented themselves as an alternative to the Ni-Nis, rejecting this label as stigmatising and abusive:

The current crisis affected us disproportionately as young people and we began to see a very uncertain, if not excluded, future. Some media said we were the Lost Generation or the Ni-Ni Generation. I did not see it that way. At twenty-three, I'm a yes-yes. I study and work. (Gallego, 2011: 24-5)

(We advocate) a revolt of young people against youth (...) We had underestimated the desire of young people to enter adulthood against an entire social, political and cultural structure that wants to keep them in childhood (...) Capitalism deprives them of their own home and work, two things that children do not need and that, moreover, should not have (Youth Without Future, 2011: 10).

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<sup>3</sup> See the interesting Ni-Ni Generation website, collecting testimonies, diaries, studies and debates on the topic: [www.ninis.org](http://www.ninis.org). [Last consulted: 28/12/2012].

<sup>4</sup> In 2012 the Catalan Youth Observatory published another study, ‘*Ni-Ni Generation*’. *Stigmatisation and social exclusion* (Serracant, 2012), which examines the origin and evolution of the concept and proposes an alternative, fairer method of calculation, denouncing the fact that a whole generation has been labelled as such and been linked to debate on the crisis of values, especially when they are not the only segment of the population that neither study nor work.

Following the initial surprise, the Indignant became a media image which, by contrast with the Ni-Nis, gained strong popular support, as some of their claims (such as foreclosure on mortgaged homes, criticism of the banking system, of political corruption and welfare cuts) were shared by large segments of the population. As with the Ni-Nis, the nickname came to refer to an entire generation, which was recognisable in those who camped out in the squares from May 15 to the end of July 2011. On the first anniversary of the movement, 15 May 2012, which had gone back to local neighbourhoods and initiatives, various studies began to appear, often conducted by young activists or participants in the protests, which addressed issues such as the role of social networks and communication technologies, new forms of political participation, cyberactivism and its connections with similar other movements, such as the Greek protests, the Arab spring and Occupy Wall Street (Trilla et al., 2011; Feixa et al., 2012; Fernandez-Planells, Figueras, Feixa, 2012). Last but not least, a further effect of the crisis has been the sharp decline in publicly-funded youth research: at a time when it is more necessary than ever to have real data on youth development, the institutes and observatories dedicated to promoting such research have suffered well above average cuts, affecting the number of studies commissioned and publications produced.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Youth policies in times of austerity: conversion or elimination?**

#### *3.1. The existence of a specific policy for youth*

The consideration and treatment of youth issues across all public policy has been and still is a topic for debate and different points of view (Wallace and Bendit, 2011). The fragmentation of public policies into different areas – as well as responding to operational and practical questions – responds to a certain view, scope and dimension of public affairs, leading to a certain way of structuring sectoral policies.

In most European countries youth policies are developed on the basis of sectoral policy, youth policies stemming from actions taken in education, employment, housing, health, culture, etc. In Spain, the current structuring of public youth policies took place in 1975 with the beginning of the democratic transition and the construction of a constitutional state (Comas, 2007, Martin 2007). The model adopted recognises an individual organisational structure for youth issues – as another sectoral policy – with its own specific political and managerial structure. This option aims to increase the attention received by young people and make the actions and policies aimed at this group visible, while compensating for the lack of specific policies for young people in traditional sectoral policies. In the words of Montes:

... a comprehensive youth policy model was built in Spain, based on the mainstreaming of young people's needs and their subsequent transfer to a mainstream structure of administrative management. This has resulted in networks of specialised facilities, consolidation of the

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<sup>5</sup> Although we could not find any official statistics, both the Spanish Youth Observatory and the Catalan Youth Observatory (OCJ) have seen a reduction of calls for scholarships and research grants. For example, the OCJ's annual call for support for projects did not take place in 2011 and in 2012 was limited to using data from a survey on political participation. As for publications, the same Observatory's collection of studies is no longer published and only three editions of the series *Aportacions* have been published in the last five years (including the study on the Neither-Nors).

professional sector and the defence of specific intervention for youth issues. The circumstances of this journey and evolution of Spanish youth policies are so unique that they do not allow for comparison. (Montes, 2011: 7).

Administrative units and institutions for youth issues were set up then which may have as many as five levels of structure in the Spanish State of Autonomous Regions. From the level of central government – as is the case of the Youth Institute (INJUVE) – to the level of local government through local town councils; although in Spain local authorities are not required to meet the needs that may exist with regard to youth policies. Between these two structures are the regional governments, the provincial councils and county governments. Youth policies and practices exist on each of these levels. However, public youth policies in Spain have mainly been the concern of local governments, with politicians in charge of youth issues and administrative staff under them. The criterion of proximity to youth has ultimately been imposed, favouring policy planning and the implementation of youth programmes on a local government level.

### *3.2. The evolution of youth policy discourse and practices*

Current public youth policies in Spain came with the restoration of democracy in the late seventies and were implemented by the first democratic local governments in the early eighties. In these early years, youth policies were primarily identified with recreation. From the mid-eighties onwards, the concept of comprehensive policy appeared in discourse regarding these policies, and with it youth policies were established that were explicitly aimed at easing the transition from youth to adulthood and address certain aspects of emancipation: work, housing, education and health, primarily. Nevertheless, the practice of these policies continues to focus primarily on recreational programmes for young people and youth associations.

The late nineties saw the concept of *affirmative policies for the new status of youth* (Barcelona City Council and Barcelona Provincial Council, 1999) added to the discourse on youth policy. Under this new perspective, youth policies were only to address that which concerned young people: the affirmation of youth culture, identity and leisure, and were to leave to broader policies issues corresponding to the full citizenship of individuals or promoting group emancipation. The objective of these policies was to provide young people with as much life experience as possible and enrich their biographical pathway. This distinction, however, also only happened primarily on a discursive level, as in practice youth policies are still now mostly concerned with youth recreational programmes and youth associations. In reality, discourse regarding affirmative policies has only acted as a foundation and been used as an argument for the aforementioned policies.

In the middle of the first decade of this century, with the aim of reconciling these two discursive approaches to youth policies (transitional and affirmative), an integrating discourse was sought. Do young people need help being young or joining the adult world and therefore to stop being young? Is the goal of youth policy youth development or a speedy transition from youth? What sense is there in helping young people to be young if their access to citizenship rights considered typical of adulthood are not promoted at the same time?



In this new scenario, youth is considered a multidimensional concept defined as a stage of citizenship in which people acquire and put into practice social rights and duties. The issue is having access to all of the resources necessary to exercise this citizenship (Benedicto and Morán, 2002). Thus, added to the discourse on youth policies is the idea of affirming full citizenship for young people. The aim is for them to be able to access the social, political, economic and cultural resources necessary for exercising it, as what makes young people citizens is not possession of a number of rights, but having the power to exercise them.

This evolution of the discourse on youth policies in Spain was interrupted at the end of the first decade of the century. Diagnosis of the situation regarding young people changed very significantly in just a few years and austerity policies and cuts in social policies were imposed. For example, the budget of the Spanish Youth Institute<sup>6</sup> (INJUVE) went back to below figures of ten years ago (see Figure 6). Similar or more extreme data can be found on a regional or local government level, where many youth services have been closed down, activities and programmes introduced in recent years have been eliminated and staff numbers have been significantly reduced.

Figure 4. Budget of the National Youth Institute (INJUVE). 2000 - 2012. Government of Spain.

In some ways we can say that youth policies in Spain have been largely peripheral policies, as those actions and programmes that have been carried out have mostly affected non-essential issues with regard to changing the conditions of young people's lives (information, participation, association membership, leisure, etc.). They have been created without ever really addressing, let alone modifying, key issues for young people. Said discourse has undergone a journey that has not been matched with action and practice. It has affected the lives of young people (education, work, housing, etc.) only very unevenly, intermittently and half-heartedly. Therefore, in the best case scenario, the youth policies that have been developed may be considered as additional to action in social, cultural and educational policies.

### *3.3. Old and new challenges in the face of imposed austerity policies*

In 2012 the number of young unemployed in the European Union has now surpassed five million. One in five young people who want to work cannot find anywhere to do so. This unemployment rate is already twice the overall unemployment rate, although differences between regions and countries are very significant, with figures in some countries being five times greater. Spain, after Greece, heads this ranking with a figure of 52.9% unemployment among young people aged 16 to 25 at the end of 2012. These data illustrate the gravity of the economic situation in which we Europeans are immersed, as well as the regression young people are suffering worldwide. According to data from the International Labour

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<sup>6</sup> The Youth Institute is a public body under the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, whose main activity is directed at promoting actions in the benefit of young people.

Organization (ILO), the global unemployment rate for young people experienced its largest ever recorded increase between 2007 and 2009, from 11.9% to 13% (UNFPA, 2011: 12).

More than half of young Spaniards are unemployed and those lucky enough to have a job are on temporary contracts that keep them trapped in a situation of job insecurity with no prospects of a good career. This explains why 55% of those aged under 34 still live with their parents and why according to the European Commission Eurobarometer 68% of Spanish young people are willing to leave Spain in search of a future.

Spain also ranks first in school dropouts and the poor employability of young people according to data compiled by UNESCO (2012) in its annual survey on "Education for All". One in three Spanish youths aged 15 to 24 left secondary education before completing their studies, compared to the EU average of one in five, according to said study, which reflects progress on the educational goals set in Dakar in 2010 and whose deadline for compliance is 2015. The same UNESCO report notes that providing these young people with training and resources in the current crisis is more essential than ever. According to its calculations, it is estimated that every dollar invested in education and skills represents a return of ten dollars for the economy of the investor country. One of the objectives of youth policies would therefore seem to be unquestionable. Meanwhile, a recent report published by Oxfam (2012) states that if austerity measures and cuts in social policies are not corrected, the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Spain could increase to almost 40% of the population (two in five Spaniards) by 2022. The same report estimates that it could take up to 25 years to recover the social welfare level reached before the crisis.

According to Perez et al. (2010), in countries like Spain, with its low competitiveness, low productivity, low levels of education, low levels of technology and a sluggish labour market, the inadequate and rigid nature of its labour structures and institutions is generating harmful effects not only on productivity and economic growth, but also on the welfare of its citizens, especially the most vulnerable, including and especially, young people. Given this particular scenario, it is essential to articulate public policies that respond to these pressing and urgent needs. In our concrete case, what should be the priorities of youth policies at this stage? How can they respond effectively and efficiently to youth demands? These are not easy questions to answer and may not even have a single answer. Furthermore, the limitations of this article preclude such a comprehensive and reasoned response as this would require. However, we will suggest some questions for reflection in this respect. The distance between theoretical discourse on youth policies and practical action must be reduced. According to Comas (2011), the current crisis will determine the end of the road for youth rhetoric. In this regard: Can the current situation of crisis and imposed austerity bring the two realities closer together and favour dialogue between these two areas of youth policy? Such an occurrence would favour both.

The complexity of transversal and comprehensive action in public youth policies is another challenge to be faced. What should be the role of specific youth departments existing in the Spanish model? How to articulate transversal action requiring comprehensive attention and the existence of sectoral policies aimed at meeting the needs of people on the one hand and the existence of a specific policy for young people on the other? The division of powers between administrative levels and different governments and

coordinated and transversal work remains a challenge in public administration. In times of crisis and austerity, this challenge becomes an unavoidable necessity.

Current Spanish legislation does not guarantee the obligation to develop youth services or establish the benchmarks or minimum resources needed in each region. How can youth policies survive when the true central role has been played by local governments which are currently without resources, in debt and in some cases bankrupt, and not obliged to meet these needs? Given this complex reality and the obvious emergency it remains to be seen how sufficient social consensus is generated for these policies to be perceived as essential. Will this, in spite of everything, become a unique opportunity to reinforce and consolidate youth policy? Will we know how to seize such an opportunity?

#### **4. Social work with young people as a response to the crisis: absence or resistance?**

Social work with young people, as a pedagogical social practice that mediates between individual aspirations and social expectations (Coussée et al., 2010), should be an essential tool in dealing with crisis situations like the present one. With this perspective youth work can contribute to youth empowerment, providing young people with the tools to meet the challenges of the new socio-economic situation (temporary jobs, long-term unemployment, difficulties and delays in emancipation, etc.). But it can also facilitate social integration and work on social cohesion. If youth policies are established on the basis of action stemming from multiple sectoral policies, intervention in the world of young people comprises the actions of multiple agents, aims and practices that must fit with and influence a dynamic reality, becoming an infinitely fluid, flexible, and mobile sphere (Bradford, 2011). Let us look more closely at how some elements of youth work are set up in Spain.

If we focus our attention on youth intervention professionals we see how they first appeared and then their number increased considerably over the first thirty years of Spanish democracy, with primary implementers of activities aimed at young people increasing particularly in local authorities. According to the study by the Catalan Association of Youth Policy Professionals (Viñas, 2010), 62.1% of Catalan youth professionals work for a town council, compared to 10.8% who work for an association, 9.5% a district council, and 7.2% a private company. Social sciences (social education, pedagogy, sociology, social work and psychology) are the major training areas for these professionals, although they are not identified with a particular specialisation, which means there is a broad methodological diversity in the sector. It is also during the aforementioned time period that some progress was made towards establishing a regulatory framework for the profession and the standardisation of profiles and working conditions for these professionals (Viñas, 2010), and when strategic and methodological tools were constructed to improve the quality of interventions (youth plans, guidelines for making youth diagnoses, youth forums, etc). That said, there is currently a prevalence of uncertainties regarding identity and issues regarding the objectives and methodologies of youth intervention practices implemented by most professionals in the field. These uncertainties and issues do not differ greatly from those raised by their counterparts in other European countries, though with different political imperatives and emphasis. Examples of this are the

issues raised in the three workshops on youth work history (2008, 2009 and 2011), where key questions such as ‘What is youth work?’ ‘What does youth work mean for young people?’ ‘What does youth work mean for society?’ and ‘What is youth policy?’ came up for discussion, among others (Schild, Vanhee, 2010).

#### *4.1. The effects of austerity on youth work*

With the austerity policies and cuts in social policies, the advances made in this area have been brought to an abrupt halt. The national government and the regional governments have budget cash flow problems. They are delaying the awarding of grants to public, private and third sector bodies and significantly reducing their amounts. Some of the most important consequences of this situation are:

- On a youth worker level: terminated contracts, extending powers of related areas (culture, women, recreational activities, sports, etc.), and a reduction in working hours. Another phenomenon is associated with reducing the number of professional categories for managers and the allocation of positions with lower requirements in terms of qualifications than those required (Catalan Association of Youth Policy Professionals, 2012). This allows the hiring of not always qualified people on lower salaries, which raises questions over the quality of the services provided.

- On an interventions level: closing services, fewer activities and significantly fewer youth projects and interventions. By way of example, the closure of two local youth centres in the city of Palma de Mallorca in July 2011 due to a failure to meet the costs of leasing the premises, and closure of Cunit Espai Jove youth centre in May 2012.

All this is accompanied by a trend towards the privatisation of public services, not always a guarantee of quality and very much favouring the highest bidder. That is, whoever can give not the best quality but the most economically beneficial service. Along with this, and as a side effect of it, we have a decrease in the number of small and medium-sized companies dedicated to youth intervention in favour of large companies with sufficient capital to withstand financial downturns.

Neither do youth organisations derive benefit from this situation. For example, the decreased budget of the Spanish Youth Council (CJE), a platform of youth bodies comprising youth organisations from around the country and the Youth Council of each Autonomous Region, along with that of the National Youth Council of Catalonia (see figure 5), a platform that brings together 92 youth bodies and local youth councils of Catalonia. Both of these Councils are non-profit public-law bodies that promote the interests and participation of young people in society and before the government.

#### **Figures 5. Spanish Youth Council and National Youth Council of Catalonia budgets**

This precarious scenario weakens the possibilities for youth intervention. How can we make quality interventions without enough staff? What leeway will youth organisations be left with if they are weakened?

#### *4.2. In the face of absence, resistance*

Youth work must be redefined and reaffirmed to resist this frenzy of cuts. This redefinition must focus on both the methodologies and objectives of intervention and communication of the impact its practices can have. Let us look at this more closely. On a methodological level it is essential to find new ways of connecting with a generation of young people with a potentially open and uncertain, not to mention insecure, future who are taking refuge in short and very-short-term projects, taking the extended present as the temporal area of reference (Leccardi, 2011). Young people who are no lovers of institutional participation but who have more individualised and aggressive forms of participation (an example of this being the 15-M movement). Young people incorporated in the world of information technology and with a communicative culture centered around cyberspace. But most of all, young people who are affected first-hand by the crisis we are involved in and who demand solutions to basic needs such as employment and the right to decent housing to allow them to emancipate themselves. In this situation, youth workers must act as promoters of youth empowerment, working in collaboration with young people. They must work by listening, talking and exploring with young people, using methodologies focused on responsive participation, self-reflection and striving to become somebody (Bradford, 2011). It will also be necessary to work with other professionals in a coordinated and transversal way to provide comprehensive interventions and support young people. Last but not least, it will also be necessary to work creatively to find alternatives to the resources lacking in the sector: by networking, training young trainers, harnessing the potential of information technologies, among others.

As for communication, it will be essential to have improved communication of best practices in youth intervention. We refer here to the need to provide evidence of the relevance of these practices so that they are valued and pushed on a political level. As noted by Spence (2011: 264) “the creation of research-based, theoretically developed and practice informed text is necessary to the process of creating a discursive field in which the meanings, values and potential of youth work as professional activity might be effectively communicated”. An area such as youth work, which is often perceived as being supplementary to other educational and social services, must invest effort in demonstrating good practices and the impact that these have, not only on young people but also on society. This requires effort from professionals, recording and disseminating the results of practices, collaborating on research, developing data collection tools and systematising processes that provide evidence of the impact of actions.

In situations as complex as the current one, with its proliferation of social problems, the government should be investing like never before in social policies that contribute to prevention and welfare for the most vulnerable groups, including young people, the first to suffer the devastating consequences of the crisis.

### **5. Conclusions: juggling or trapeze?**

The current situation of austerity and cuts is clearly affecting public policy in Spain –drastically in the case of social policies, which includes youth policies. The lack of resources – in all meanings of the word

– calls into question the solidity of youth structures and services created in times of economic boom. This panorama may be seen as an invitation to review and reformulate existing youth policies, peripheral and subsidiary to social, cultural and educational policies.

Youth policies – in Spain at least – have always manifested themselves as a form of *juggling*, influencing young people through policies far distant from the key aspects of their lives (youth information, recreation and associations, among others). This strategy has been shown to be a failure. In the best cases, attempts have been made to coordinate – without much success – different sectoral policies which have a strong bearing on the lives of young people (employment, education, housing and health, among others). However, the complexity of such transversal work has greatly limited the possibilities of constructing an authentic youth policy. The coordination or directing of youth plans have been a clear example in this respect. All of this, in the Spanish case, with very limited resources and staff with qualifications not always up to the level of demand and responsibility required.

In times of crisis, these same youth policies are becoming one of the *stellar performances of circus art*, with the actors moving between juggling and trapeze, unsure whether the traditional safety nets – the family, NGOs and the welfare state – will protect them in the event of a fall. Austerity policies are pushing the limits of youth programmes and services, with the result that the traditional balancing act of the classic peripheral youth policies is becoming complicated, resulting in the forced performance of the spectacular trapeze number. Addressing the current complexity from a position near the *Bermuda Triangle* – where young people become the object, or invisible, or disappear symbolically and physically from the centre of the stage; where youth policies disappear or are subordinated to security policies; where research is reduced or feeds on media stereotypes and youth work survives on the basis of volunteering and austerity – addressing this complexity is, without doubt, similar to performing the *triple somersault on the trapeze without a net*. A feat that requires not only skill, but also luck.

Given the scenario presented here, we are left with holding out, trusting in the competence of young professionals, in the ability of young people and youth organisations to reinvent themselves, and also trusting in the arduous task of exposing the reality behind the excessive austerity policies through research and communication that will provide data and evidence regarding the devastating effects of policies that have no faith in young people. The future of youth policy and youth work largely depends on this and requires evidence of the inconsistency of current misdirected austerity policies, as well as denouncing and demonstrating the devastating effects they are having on young people. It is essential that youth policies survive, even if in a more reduced form, now more than ever working as part of a network and seeking out new allies.

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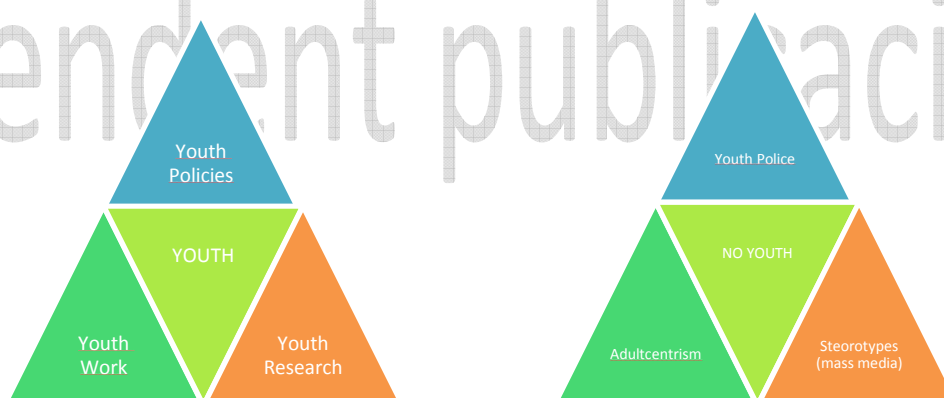
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Figure 1. The OASIS of Youth Policies



Figure 2. Youth Policies: Magic triangle or Bermuda Triangle?



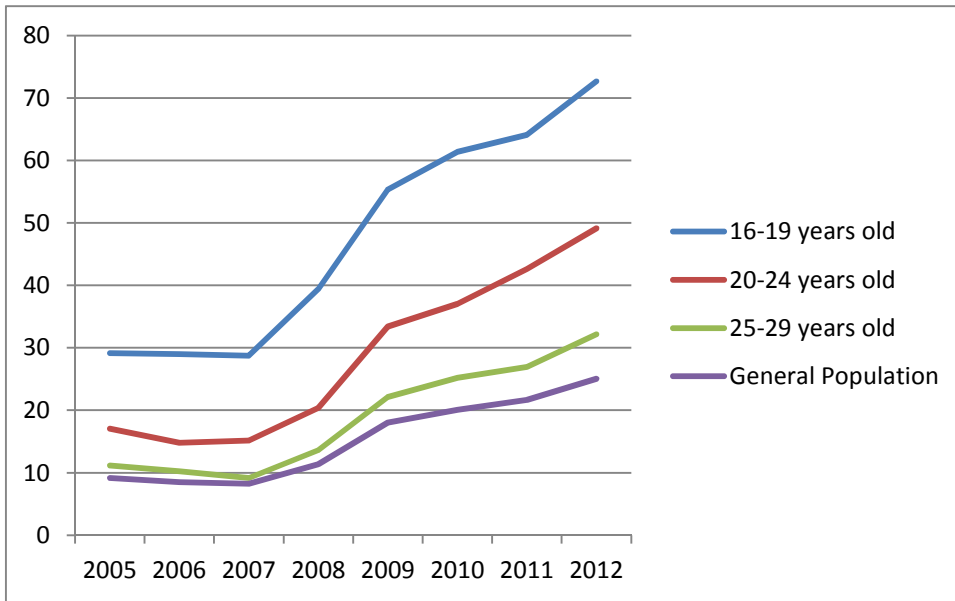


Figure 4. National Youth Institute (INJUVE) budget 2000 - 2012. Government of Spain.

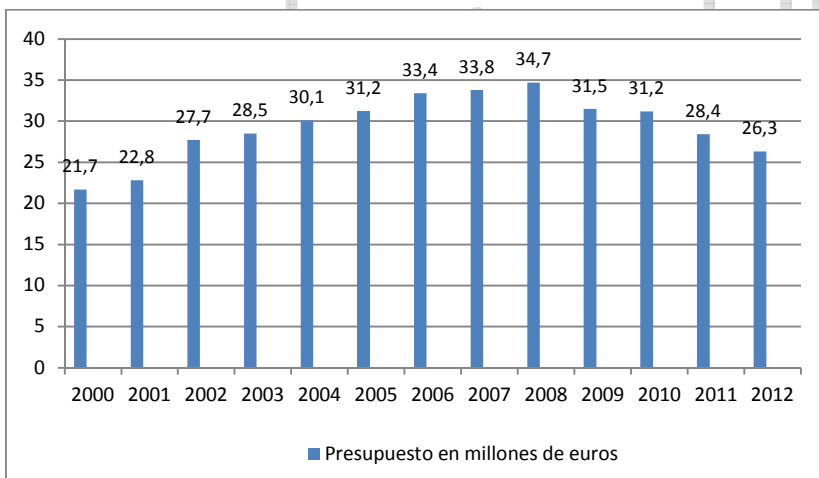
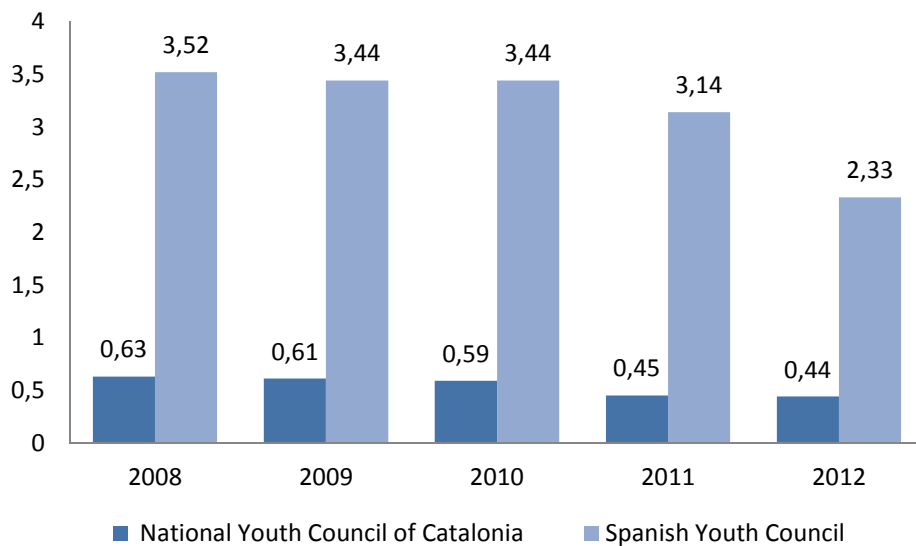


Figure 5. Spanish Youth Council budget and National Youth Council of Catalonia 2008 – 2012 (millions of euro).



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