

Youth employment in Europe – a challenge for the Churches?

24th to 26th March 2014, Brussels

Report

History and background

The 3rd Assembly of CALL 2012 in Brussels had taken the decision to establish a working group on youth employment. Due to the financial, economic and budget crisis in Europe and the European Union youth unemployment has become one of the most crucial challenges on the EU policy agenda. Therefore it was not a surprise that the delegates in the Assembly had chosen this issue as a priority for the CALL-network.

Nevertheless it was an open question for CALL and its working group from the beginning to which extent a European network can contribute in a substantial way to the national, regional and local demands of young people, the churches and the problem of unemployment.

For this reason the small working group developed a concept for a conference in order to explore what could be the possible interest for European churches to contribute to this issue and which potential they had in this area. It was decided to reach out to three different target groups: young people, giving them a space to testify of their situation, complemented by the analysis and reflections of youth and social workers; church delegates, who can follow up the ideas and conclusions of the conference; representatives from churches and church related organisations who already implement youth employment projects.

The conference

The conference started after lunch on Monday, 24 March, and was closed with lunch on Wednesday, 26 March. The conference centre was Chant d'Oiseau in Brussels, a former convent. Two sessions took place in the European Parliament. There were 60 participants to the conference, coming from 17 different European countries, including Macedonia, Georgia and Ukraine. One third of the participants were younger than 28 years. Participants came from Orthodox (PL, GR, and CY), Anglican, Methodist and Protestant churches. Several participants were already involved in established or establishing projects on youth unemployment. One example: the Methodist church is seeking for ideas and concepts on the topic and used the conference to broaden and deepen its reflections.

Panel - Input I: Reality of young people in Europe – testimonies from different European countries

On the first panel Ms. Guilia Pagliani from Italy, Ms. Zsafia Zimak from Hungary and Mr. Samuel Stevenson from the United Kingdom spoke of their own individual situation, when seeking for employment. All of them were representing a special group of young unemployed people, which has become increasingly relevant over the last years: highly qualified and well educated young people, writing many job applications, getting some invitations to interviews but no job in the end.

Guilia described how businesses are using the competitive situation of young people to engage them in unpaid internships. Half of her friends are leaving the country seeking for jobs in other countries. Zsafia reported on the vicious circle in which young people are locked in situations when both a certain educational degree and work experience are required: investing one's time and energy in studies means no time to work, thus having no job experience, which leads to getting no job if relevant job experience is required. Samuel elaborated on the psychological effects of young unemployed and stated very clearly that one feels worthless being unemployed for six months.

All three panellists made proposals on how to change this situation fundamentally: internships should be offered to get job experience, but should also be paid and taken seriously; small businesses should receive support from the state in order to be able to hire young people; churches could offer leadership training to young people as a further qualification. But young people should also put up resistance and not accept badly paid jobs. They should develop more solidarity and establish networks to become more powerful.

Panel - Input II: Causes and consequences of youth unemployment – Experiences of youth and social workers

Rev. Marie Jüptner Medková, Youth Pastor of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, CZ, Jim Davis, Good Childhood Advisor, Communications and Policy Directorate, The Children's Society, UK and Mirco Trielli, Cooperativa Sociale Zefiro, IT described the observations and reflections of social and youth workers.

They analysed an ellipse of problems: Jüptner Medková and Davis focused on the different and diverse problems young people are struggling with.

In the UK, but not only there, it is a rather new phenomenon that so many well educated and qualified young people are unemployed. A high quality education is no longer a guarantee for a well-paid job. One consequence for the UK is that students who have borrowed money from the state to finance their studies are not able to pay this money back. But also the less qualified young people are confronted with a new phenomenon: for them unemployment means to be blamed, because they are not fulfilling the expectations of society and the fact that they are unemployed is misjudged as their individual failure. Another consequence is the growing xenophobia, rising aggressiveness against migrants and a significant Euroscepticism. Migrants are perceived as "job thieves", although most of the complainers wouldn't do the jobs migrants are doing. In the UK the vocational education has a bad or low public reputation, so that young people feel ashamed to move in this direction. Sometimes the conditions of and requirements for vocational training prevent young people from engaging in it, e.g. if hairdressers are required to supply their own equipment, which is an excessive financial demand.

For the Czech Republic other aspects have to be added: in times of communism nobody was unemployed and jobs were secure, therefore the situation today seems to be worse than in former times. Some regions have to struggle with unemployment much more than others. Similar to the UK, also in CZ vocational education has a low reputation, which results in too many unemployed university graduates and too few skilled workmen, where there might be a need for them. A high or even proper social status depends on a high degree of education. On the other hand public schools are only offering a limited

level of foreign language education, which often creates limitations regarding qualifications of young people.

Moreover, prejudices are still determining the trends in the labour market: A real job should be a full-time job. Big companies are recognized, small enterprises not. Mobility within the country was not practised in the past. The Roma population suffers from special social and employment conditions due to their exclusion from society.

Trielli, working as a vocational trainer for young people in a social company, highlighted the other point of the ellipse: The conditions of the work place have changed. The life of some companies is shorter than the working life of a person. People have to be re-motivated and have to be flexible. Young people are too often unclear about their goals and aims, which is leading to difficulties when searching and applying for jobs. They are not really fighting for their jobs and they have to learn to present themselves in a convincing way. Self-confidence has to be developed and to be strengthened.

In the discussion it was highlighted that the labour market has changed during the crisis. Industrial economy has been partly destroyed and globalization is influencing the shape of the labour market. It is no longer the national border and the national state which define the labour market. Competition on this market is growing on a global scale.

The panellists agreed that churches have a special task addressing young people with the encouragement that the dignity and the value of a person are not grounded in work and the work place. This also means the confirmation that everyone has the right to be treated honestly. Churches as an intergenerational community should be a place of exchange and mutual help, so that young people get support from the experience and knowledge of others.

Panel in the European Parliament - Input III: EU policy on youth unemployment

Jürgen Klute, MEP, Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left, hosted the sessions in the EP. Sari Essayah, MEP, European People's Party, Max Uebe, Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, European Commission and Giorgio Zecca, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, European Youth Forum (EYF), Brussels, participated in the panel discussion.

Uebe presented the different tools the European Commission has developed and proposed to address youth unemployment: support for more mobility; the quality framework for traineeships; a European Alliance for apprenticeships; and the Youth Guarantee, a tool which is meant to secure that every person under 25 gets an offer for education, training or a job within a period of 4 months after leaving education.

Uebe and Essayah underlined that the Youth Guarantee is a European instrument to improve and accelerate structural reforms in the Member States. Essayah argued that the main responsibility to address the issue lies on national level. Best practices on the level of municipalities have to be shared. Klute questioned the financial implications of the EU youth policy. For the EU countries which have to consolidate the national budgets by cutting down social programmes and projects, it will be difficult to implement the co-financing which is needed to use EU-funds. Zecca highlighted that the aim of all attempts has to be to re-establish the autonomy, the freedom and the right of young people to make their own decisions. The EU youth policy needs more funding than the 6 billion Euro assigned so far for the next two years. The EU has to invest into the job market and the creation of jobs.

The panellists informed the participants that in line with the EU neighbourhood policy the youth policy instruments of the EU may also be applied in Non-EU-countries. Uebe added that 22 EU countries have handed over their plans to implement the Youth Guarantee to the European Commission.

Even though the implementation of the Youth Guarantee is to be dealt with at the national level, the European Commission would still be supervising and offering advice

regarding the plans and their implementation. After submitting their national plans to the European Commission some Member States were already asked by the Commission to revise their plans. These documents are accessible on the Commission website.¹ The goal of the Commission is to bring down youth unemployment at least to the level of adult unemployment.

Concerning the demand for more mobility – and young people from Eastern Europe seem to be more mobile than those from Southern Europe – Klute insisted on the difference between free movement and a forced mobility.

At the end of the discussion Essayah concluded that the churches and the gospel have a specific task in this situation: to highlight that a person is more than the European “homo oeconomicus”, more than a statistic figure, more than a job seeker and that the identity of a person is not based on her or his working place.

Panel in the European Parliament - Existing solutions: Presentation of projects of churches and church related organisations

During the second panel held at the EP three existing projects addressing youth unemployment were presented:

Ole Meldgaard, **Kofoeds Skole, Denmark** - <http://international.kofoedsskole.dk>. Kofoeds Skole started already in 1928, in a time of high unemployment in Denmark. Mr Kofoeds was himself unemployed. The project started as a church based work and today is an independent organisation with 23 sister schools in 9 other European countries. The offer to enrol is open to every unemployed, who are in principle called “students”. More than 125 courses and workshops are listed in the programme. The aim is not only to improve employability by training but also to investigate on the health and social situation of the individual person. 50% of the students have a foreign background, representing 90 different nationalities from all over the world. Kofoeds Skole cooperates on special trainings with the public job centres and with companies.

Debbie Garden, **One in a million**, Tackling Youth Unemployment, Frontier Youth Trust, Mission with young people at risk, **United Kingdom** - <http://www.fyt.org.uk>. The starting point of the project was the experience of youth unemployment in the UK and in church parishes. The Synod of the Church of England started to discuss the issue. First steps were workshops in parishes about good practice and the exchange about local projects. From these experiences the project developed an “App” together with youth workers which provides detailed information and support for all sorts of questions on the issue of youth unemployment.

Laura Nitti, **Advocating for the right to work**, A project of Protestant congregations in Rome, **Italy**. This is a rather new project, carried out by 5 denominations in Rome. Since the emerging of the crisis in 2009 in Italy, churches are discussing the situation of people in precarious work positions, including the living conditions of migrants and the situation of unemployed people. The project started with a questionnaire to clarify the needs of the parishes. In Italy the question of social justice is traditionally linked to the institutions of the state and to the Trade Unions. The next step is now to open a meeting point, offering orientation so that people are better equipped for and informed on the “jungle of traineeship offers”.

¹ See: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>

Conclusions

The above mentioned sessions made up the first main part of the conference. The second part was built on the work of the participants in the conference. "**Open Space**" and "**World café**" were the methods to debate the issue of youth unemployment, having in mind the input of the different sessions of the first part, and to generate conclusions.

Some of the main conclusions² reflect on how churches and politics on different levels can and have to contribute to overcome youth unemployment.

Regarding **churches in Europe**, the following was highlighted:

- Churches need to be more aware of the unemployment issues at all levels. Therefore it is proposed to determine a yearly European Sunday in all of Europe and in the whole CEC family to highlight the Biblical and theological significance of labour, work and employment; an Employment Sunday - possibly the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.
- Churches at central level should give a preference to contractors who employ apprentices.
- Churches should be aware of good practice in social economy projects in their own and other countries and how these could be used to develop employment opportunities.
- Churches should look at the EU Youth Guarantee scheme to see whether it will be useful and lobby the national organiser to see where the Churches can be involved.

The demands to and tasks of **politics in Europe** are addressing the various levels of policy:

On the local level

- Politics should implement better training on employment in schools and universities, e. g. by investing in Career services, aiming to have people leaving education with a job to go to and by improving the relationship between schools and the labour market or work experience.
- Local governments and churches should consider to which extend they can use own property – like land - to actually invest in people and job creation. Churches and local governments can jointly fund projects where possible.

On the national level

- There should be incentives for employers hiring young people (e.g. in Denmark). Instruments might be: public support for salaries; tax breaks for employing young people (e.g. Germany: tax breaks for employing people with disabilities); financial incentives for permanent contracts.
- Successful big businesses can mentor new businesses – involving financial, administrative, legal and other areas.

On EU level

- Politics has to recognise that mobility is important and make relocation grants and language training more easily accessible. Especially poorer people should be supported to use ERASMUS programmes.

² All conclusions are also published on the CSC-CALL-website: <http://csc.ceceurope.org/issues/social-and-economic-issues/call-network/>

- The EU should create a Young People / People friendly label for companies that employ a proportionate number of young people ethically, on permanent well paid contracts.
- One currently unemployed person from each member state should join the Unit of the European Commission on youth unemployment, GD Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, to tackle youth unemployment.
- The next European Commission should establish an EU Commissioner for Children and an EU Commissioner for Youth.