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UNESCO POLICY BRIEF ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Supporting Youth Civic and Political Engagement: Supranational and National Policy Frameworks

Comparative Perspectives

UNESCO Policy Brief

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Executive Summary:

The aim of this brief is to provide an overview of international, European and national level policy relating to the civic and political engagement of young people.

This brief is based on a report that examines and compares some of the central policy frameworks—at the supranational level and at the national level in three states: England, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland—that argue for and seek to promote young people's civic and political engagement (Chaskin, McGregor, Brady, 2018a). The brief will:

- Provide an overview of UN, EU and national policy contexts
- Identify the core themes that youth civic and political engagement policy incorporates
- Summarize some of the opportunities and challenges identified in these policies
- Make recommendations based on this policy analysis for how young people can be engaged more effectively in civic and political processes through education, youth forums and councils, policy and political systems.



Introduction/Overview:

Informed in part by the ratification of the UNCRC there has been an increasing policy emphasis at the UN, EU and national level on the importance of promoting the participation and engagement of young people in civic and political life. The challenges of successfully and meaningfully engaging young people civically and politically are particularly acute for disadvantaged young people, especially urban youth and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. These young people experience the challenges faced by young people more generally, but they also have to contend with disenfranchisement, which is often reinforced by negative media portrayals and punitive policies that treat them as threats to be controlled rather than as people with the agency and potential to contribute positively to society.

To address these concerns, a number of policy frameworks have been developed at both the supranational and national (and in some cases local) levels. Such policies seek to promote young people's civic and political engagement and their active participation in political processes. They also address the need for policies, services, and institutions to take young people's perspectives into account in establishing priorities and shaping provision, and they seek to establish effective mechanisms to support greater inclusion and participation of young people.

Method: The analysis was based on the following policies:

SUPRANATIONAL - UN

- World Programme of Action for Youth, 2010
- UNESCO's Operational Strategy on Youth 2014-2021
- The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Youth Strategy 2014-2017 Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future

SUPRANATIONAL - EU

- An EU Strategy For Youth—Investing And Empowering
- The Council on Europe's *Enter!*: Access to Social Rights for Young People from Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods
- The European Union's Erasmus+ Inclusion And Diversity Strategy
- 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the Implementation of the Renewed Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field (2010-2018)

NATIONAL - REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

- National Children's Strategy 2000
- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020)
- National Youth Strategy 2015



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- National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015-2020)

NATIONAL - NORTHERN IRELAND

- The Northern Ireland Youth Forum Strategic Plan 2011-2014 and the Youth Action Northern Ireland Strategic Plan
- Our Children and Young People: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016
- Priorities For Youth: Improving Young People's Lives Through Youth Work
- Together: Building a United Community

NATIONAL - ENGLAND

- Public Service Agreement (PSA) 14: Increase The Number of Children and Young People on the Path to Success
- Positive for Youth: A New Approach to Cross-Government Policy for Young People Age 13 To 19
- National Citizen Service
- Prevent Strategy (2006 and 2011)

Results:

Key policy documents were analysed under the following four themes:

- Perspectives on Young People
- Impetus for Policies on Youth Engagement
- Rationales behind the Policies
- Strategies, Mechanisms and Actors

The commonalities noted among policies across these themes included:

- Concerns about the **negative impacts of large numbers of youth remaining disengaged** from society
- Perspective of young people as both **“a source of concern and a beacon of hope”**
- Recognition of the **impact of inequality and exclusion** that contribute to youth disenfranchisement
- **Education** as key to strategies for youth engagement
- A focus on **innovation, capacity building** and **inter-sectoral collaboration**

Differences among policies were noted as follows:

- Supranational frameworks express more concern about **the impact of political climate** and the withdrawal of many young people, especially disadvantaged youth, from participation in formal political processes than frameworks at the national level



- **Youth radicalisation**, is especially noted the EU and English frameworks and impact of conflict in historical context in NI and ROI
- In England and Northern Ireland the focus is principally on the so-called **NEET population** who are dislocated from both education and employment
- An emphasis on **rights** is expressed in all policies, but is more explicit at the supranational level and in Ireland than in England or Northern Ireland
- Supranational frameworks tend to focus relatively more on **collective benefits to social development** and national frameworks relatively more on beneficial **outcomes at the individual level**, with a particular focus in England and Northern Ireland on the prevention of negative behaviors and outcomes.

Beyond these similarities and differences, there are several ambiguities and cross-cutting dynamics in evidence, including:

- Balancing between **rights versus more instrumental benefits**
- Promoting positive **youth development versus preventing negative behaviours** and outcomes
- Impact of **countervailing pressures** (for example, around funding or worries about radicalisation) that may lead to some potential tensions between the rhetoric framing and stated goals of policy frameworks and the strategies they engage
- Need for policy frameworks to **take account of the range of diversity** represented amongst the youth population
- **Fundamental structural inequalities** that impact on youth that needs to be addressed far beyond youth engagement strategies.

Policy Recommendations: Based on this analysis, the main recommendations from the report are as follows:

- Future policies should align rationales, intent, and expectations more explicitly
- Policy orientations at different levels need to be linked together more clearly. In so doing, policies can identify more precisely what can be done at what level and aligning orientations to each
- Resources (finances, political capital, organizational capacity) need to be specified and mobilized to catalyze concrete action on the ground at different levels
- Outcome expectations and evaluation needs to be more explicitly stated.

The key message from this analysis for **Application** is that for youth to have effective influence, opportunities to express their priorities and engage in civic and political action must be met by interlocutors that respect and take seriously their input:

“Strategies to give children a voice will only work if there are adults willing to listen to them” (DCYA, 2015: 17).