Current developments in Europe causing growing social problems and how social work and social policy should cope with them

Hans-Uwe Otto
Universität Bielefeld

Introductionary remarks: Social Problems in Europe

In these times of crisis in Europe it is necessary to talk also about social problems and groups at risk. On the one hand the EU is a significant political masterpiece with an enormous ongoing impact on 27 member states – not only free access for the population to travel without any borders and generally with a lot of helpful other advantages involved for instance at the labour market in the economics etc. is a historical event one should never forget. However, the financial misleading actions from the so-called elite that also seriously aggravate social problems are currently distinctive in a weighty way. By demanding social justice we have to remember the overall intention of the EU to become an equal world player in the economy compared with the US and China driven by an overall ideology which in the meantime is called "turbo capitalism" or "predatory capitalism" by leading conservatives themselves who do not know anymore how to react against this development. But in talking about the European social model we have to face the intention of the EU as continue stabilizing the market capitalistic society which in fact till today broadens the gap between the rich and the poor in more or less all European member states. As a result, the structure of a class society is clearly back and arising problems for the suffering population become more and more apparent. Old and new social crises dominate the current development and also the so-called "normal" people are helpless victims on this capitalistic

playing ground. For example only a few of the main problems which are coming up in a new and dramatic form should be mentioned. First, the migration and the process of exclusion of these people. Before they get a proper chance in the host society they will experience all the discriminating forms in everyday life. The social support and the welfare subsidies for them are more or less below the threshold. In addition, precarisation, low wage policy, unemployment and poverty have to be mentioned. The social misery in numerous countries is increasing. The continent forgets its children. This misery of the young people is not only an evidence of incapacity from the economic point of view, but also for the whole process of growing up under equal chances and conditions of justice.

To make it more plausible by underlining the situation of vulnerable youth and their families will be underlined.

1. The situation of vulnerable youth in Europe

The increases in youth unemployment across the member states have perhaps been of greatest significance and have been growing to the center problem of the EU social policy. In 2011, the youth unemployment rate was 22% in the EU-27; in October 2010 it was 21%. The lowest rates were observed in Germany (7.8%), Austria (8.2%) and the Netherlands (8.6%), and the highest in Spain (50.5%) (cf. Eurostat, 2012).

A number of reasons can be identified for this negative development:
- the general contraction of the economy and labour market
- reluctance of employers to take on new employees
- and the overall increase in competition for a decreasing number of jobs (Oxford Economics, 2010). These factors present problems for all young people trying to take the first steps in the labour market, but particularly for those facing greatest labour market barriers such as:
- those who have been in care;
- young parents;
- those with caring responsibilities;

- those with disabilities;
- young offenders;
- and those with mental health issues.

First findings of the Bielefeld coordinated EU Collaborative research Project "Making Capabilities Work" (WorkAble) involving 10 European states give insights into the group of young people who fail in the standard routes of education and transition to employment and can therefore be seen as the most vulnerable group. They are likely to be young people
- with parents of low educational background
- from a low social class or manual working class.
- from a migrant background.
- with actual or ascribed non-conformist behaviours.
- This target group sometimes, but not always, includes young people with physical or mental disabilities.

Unemployment can have a long lasting impact on a young person's future career prospects. Those who have been unemployed in their youth experience long-term negative impacts on their career development, earnings and health (Bell & Blanchflower, 2009 & 2010). These effects can be felt for many years with individuals experiencing the 'scar of youth unemployment' when they are in their 40s (Gregg & Tominey, 2004). Further, it has been argued that young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, can become trapped in 'poor jobs' or 'poor work' throughout adulthood (Green & Owen, 2006). There is also the suggestion that early poor performance in the labour market can have a market effect on future prospects (Schroeder et al., 2008). There is evidence that young people (in addition to other vulnerable groups in the labour market) are more likely to be concentrated in atypical forms of employment such as temporary or part time work. While for some this may be a way into the labour market, for many young people it can lead to unstable unemployment and a lack of career path (Barbieri, 2007). The economic crisis has led to an increase in atypical forms of work with employers cutting hours rather than making employees redundant. Evidence from a European Trade

Union Confederation survey suggests that young women are increasingly being offered atypical employment contracts (ETUC, 2011).

Although the objective of combating social exclusion and poverty was a prominent feature of the 'Lisbon Strategy 2000' and employment is often claimed to be the best protection against poverty, this does not seem to apply any more. In 2007, in the EU 27, about 9% of persons aged 18-24 were working and nevertheless were under the poverty line (Vogel, 2011). In addition, labour market experts say that the hardships of the gathering recession will hurt the working poor (especially younger job seekers) or young people from working poor families to reach their educational goals.

Key to addressing inequalities in the employment of young people is to identify those strategies which work best in getting young people back into work. From a capabilities perspective this would be those activation policies that go beyond simply placing young people into work but also give them the freedom to choose work that they have reason to value.

A key issue that has been identified is that the increase in the number of young people accessing employment services is likely to put therefore a strain on existing services, which may lead to those young people with the most severe barriers to employment and living in the most disadvantaged areas not getting the help they need.

The 'EU 2020' Strategy is perceived as an answer towards inequalities promoting social innovation as a core of change by offering and enhancing innovative education, training and employment opportunities for the most vulnerable people and the most deprived communities among the EU and within the EU member states. However, an integrated approach to social problems of young people has not been carried out in most of the European countries yet.

Most of the integrated approach perspectives used until now have been focused on employment as the key integration operator. In the so-called "world of activation", integration has been thought off in terms of the contribution of social policies domains (health, housing, substance abuse, social assistance, childcare, training, guidance, etc.) to employment policy.

2. The Capabilities Approach and youth policy

Here a shift in this conception will be proposed.It is argued that the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2007 & 2011; Otto & Ziegler, 2008 & 2010; Sen, 2009) invites to change the focus of policy. Instead of having the labour market as the sole landscape for policies and the sesame of programmes for youths, the idea of focusing also on well being will be brought in. Since employment in itself could not be the sole ambition of social policies and welfare state's evolution, and employment policy obviously does not lead to smart growth and sustainable development also promote the idea that although employment remains a key point of entry to social inclusion, integrated policies should be evaluated and designed with regards to their ability to enhance capabilities and flourishing for young people.

Research literatures, as well as findings from our research project (WorkAble), suggest that it is those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas who are at most risk from long-term inequality in the labour market. However, less is known about how to give voice to these groups of young people and their experiences and aspirations.

The proposed aims at situating young people's voice by taking into account the character of social support networks, may they be public institutions, families, religious institutions, friends, neighbourhoods, sports clubs, employers or others. It supports social innovation by shedding light on the interplay, the opportunities and obstacles put into practice in the relations between different young people and their different social support networks. Therefore, one should implement participatory research methods which address the idea of agency, a key concept in the Capability Approach. Sen considers people "not merely as 'the patient' whose well being commands attention, but also as 'the agent' whose actions can transform society" (Dreze & Sen, 1989). A participatory research process enables us to involve all those affected by the practice of developing and evaluating capabilities, e.g. capability for voice or capability to aspire, in and through social programmes; but also in and through non-institutionalized social networks (Walker, 2005, p. 109), The capability of voice is the ability to voice one's concerns, opinions

and aspirations and make them count in the course of public discussions (e.g. Bonvin & Orton, 2009).

The capability to aspire can be defined as a future-oriented capability which opens up a new possibilities: the capability to project oneself into the future and formulate one's expectations. It includes a constructive aspect, since it means being able to express wishes, needs, preferences and make choices. It requires having the necessary resources to be able to hope to steer one's own future: resources for participating and acting as well as contesting and challenging the present situation when it needs to be changed (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68).

Concerning capability for voice and to aspire it becomes clear that by using the Capability Approach, a framework is implemented in which on the one hand the agency of young people's is taken seriously, and on the other hand the interaction with social structures and institutions becomes central. This requires a participation approach. The main contribution of the participation approaches lies in the idea of perceiving these process of social transformation as a collective process.

Beyond a mere income or employability led definition of inequality, participatory research can capture the complexities, multidimensionality and underlying dynamics of inequality rather than just measure through indicators the manifestation of inequality. It shows how clusters of interlocking disadvantage disable marginalised groups in terms of participation, representation, collective action and citizenship and therefore takes a precise look on linkages between intervention, participation and empowerment. However, it is obvious that this requires not just the opening up of opportunities and capabilities (e.g. to aspire) but also revisiting state welfare provision as a precondition for any meaningful sort of participation (Cleaver, 2001).

3. The pressure on Social work

Currently all European countries are not able to find solutions which give the vulnerable youth the chance to lead a life they really would like to do. The stabilizing percentage of early school leavers e.g. is very often the starting

point into an uncertain career with mostly a low chance to be integrated into the society as an adult who can independently lead their life. Beside the national attempts the EU ideology behind some solutions, e.g. 'Youth on Move' and 'Youth 2020', will be controlled by a radical focus on employability knowing that there are no chances available in the required scope. So, there should be alternatives in a broader perspective of an educational focus which will give these youngsters the chance to become a subject, which means to get a voice as a member of civil society. In our opinion, this has to be a task for a critical Social Work, but it is not easy to realize opportunities to develop capabilities combined with structural chances.

But without this relation a lot of measures are a circle of no way out for the transfer from school to work.

The problems of the old and new social crisis cannot be solved without structural changes in the European social model itself. This battle is rather a paradigmatic shift. For Social Work a radical reflexivity is needed to position itself in the current social policy and the dominating norms.

In all countries we see e.g. the market-driven welfare organisation and the growing number of private agencies to mainly strive for money, but also declaring better work and higher efficiency and effectivity. This development obviously enjoys growing popularity even among social workers who lose their identity as professionalized experts at the same time. So, this dramatic change is not only driven by the organisation itself. This will provide crucial reference points to public and private service providers particularly in the light of the new distribution of responsibilities between public-financed, not-for-profit and for-profit organisations. For quite some time now the European welfare state models have become under heavy pressure. This pressure was characterised by the discussion on the nature of social solidarity under the impact of neoliberalism. This has brought about socio-political restrictions in almost every European country – at times in extreme form.

Against this background many European countries are witnessing a certain radicalization of the social policy discourse about the new definition of the social – not least because social security systems are increasingly doing more to bring about insecurity than security. One of the current problems is, however, the normative reference points both of the welfare state and of social

work embedded in it. It is obvious that the objects as well as the aims of social work have a normative character (integration, autonomy, justice, political maturity or human dignity, capabilities etc.). There is an intimate connection between what happens in social policy and politics and social work, witness such current developments as the neo-liberal transformation of the welfare state, the growing flexibilization and, because of it, the precarity of employment, cuts in social benefits, the erosion of hard-won social advances, and the decline of solidarity. All of these are complemented by an ideology of personal responsibility and the pressure to take on responsibility for one's own life. It is against this background that the need to tackle various issues has arisen, such as the question in how far the relation in social work between help and control is shifting, and what social inequalities are being reproduced or are getting normative support from theoretical constructs. If social work is considered as work situated at section boundaries and subjected to an intersectional perspective, then a critical analysis can be made of lines of difference and normative boundaries. But what are the norms that social work can refer to, both as a discipline and as a profession? Where is its place in the field of social and political conditions, and where can current theoretical debates be normatively situated? What concepts can be utilized to capture the normative relation between welfare state and social work? And is social work restricted to merely taking over social norms or can it also examine these yardsticks critically, both as profession and academic discipline, and lay a reasoned foundation, if necessary, for its own targets? From the point of view of social policy, the question has to be raised what is happening to social work, that is to say, does it allow itself to be dominated by economic considerations or does it put up active resistance? Will people in social work continue to be the henchmen of neoliberal politics? Will social work in the last resort merely serve to legitimate the welfare state? Or will it be able to hold its own in the face of current trends towards efficiency maximization and the devolution of costs to its addressees? Or, what is more, will it try to find out in critical debate what scope there is for initiatives of its own? And, given the present realities of social policy and politics that have to be viewed with a rather critical eye, will it still be possible to save or even extend measures promoting individual autonomy?

The question of how much and what kind of normativity social work needs is to serve for the analysis of processes in social policy and politics. Therefore, much more than on the national level the European dimension requires an open and self-reflexive discussion about the future of a cooperative critical social work in Europe in order to find comprehensive solutions reflecting the different national cultures and welfare organizations. That is the only chance to overcome the current European programmes and the one-sided problem definition of inclusion by employability.

Therefore, the question of identity and normativity has to be discussed.

In any case the question of identity and normativity has to be answered by professional social workers. Professional social workers need to answer this question before responding to the people who are asking for help and support in their personal suffering in and on society.

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