



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: ITALY 2

No Tav: Stigma as a drive for social change

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Italy, our research focussed on young people who are the target of a strong stigmatisation process due to their involvement in a social movement opposing the construction of a high-speed railway (the TAV) between France and Italy.

This policy brief is concerned with the media portrayal of the young activists as “terrorists” and “anti-progress” and the nation-wide construction of stigma that derives from such portrayal. However, despite the strong stigmatisation they are subjected to, these young people succeed in interpreting instances of social change by borrowing, from the overall No Tav movement, the key features that allow them to turn stigma into pro-active social engagement. Our field research demonstrates that the feeling of belonging to an enlarged community of people sharing the same values and the extraordinary trustful relationship established between the young and the elder activists, are key to transforming the negative effects of stigma into positive engagement. Such transformation ultimately leaves the young people with the awareness and the will to drive social change without delegating this responsibility to the State or the Institutions.

The policy recommendations are directed towards:

- Journalists, particularly those working in the national media
- Local authorities and policy makers
- Police, particularly those on duty during demonstrations
- Professionals involved in the work of the judiciary
- Practitioners and social workers in the youth sectors

The aim of the recommendations is to:

- Inform about the overall social engagement of young activists, the values and the motivations that inspire them;
- Raise awareness on the innovation potential of young activists;

- Contribute to prevent stigmatisation and repression;
- Stimulate a debate on the positive effects of trustful intergenerational relations and supportive environments/communities on the young
- Encourage active participation of young people in society

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support local communities

Cohesive local communities can have powerful effects on young people. As our young respondents reported, having a cohesive and protective community behind them which supports their agency and with which they share the main values provides young people with strength. They identify themselves with the local community but also with the enlarged No Tav community; and they openly express pride in belonging to such a community. The young activists share with the community the major values that inspire them (e.g., solidarity, social justice, diversity, sustainable environment) and convey all those values in agency with and for society. Most importantly, the feeling of belonging to a community allows young people to find their place in society and they become aware of the interdependency connecting each individual to all others. This ultimately encourages them to mobilize jointly in order to achieve the societal changes they deem necessary. This is a key point resulting from our field research: there seems to be a direct link between the awareness of belonging to a community and the young people's propensity to social engagement, on the one hand. On the other hand, links exist between the young people's propensity to social engagement and their refusal to accept the "dependency culture" (our respondents openly speak of a "delegation system") that justifies social passivity. The innovative potential of young people, including young people 'in conflict', can be best expressed when young people themselves are placed within a community with which they identify and with which they share the same values.

Examples

Sense of belonging:

"There are actual bonds...with the place, the valley, the people... and in my opinion this is the heart of this struggle. There is this sense of belonging connecting everyone (...) Something I believe is missing in an urban context. Because possibly there is not as much dialogue and sense of belonging, even". (Clara)

Interdependency:

"I mean one's own feeling of belonging to a community and the idea that we are all small pieces of it, right? It's together how we can get results (...) When someone leaves it is an important part of it that goes, and when a new one arrives, it's an important one that joins us". (Roberto)

"I really like the idea itself of movement, of people who are not 'one' anymore, who don't act only for themselves but jointly with others, in friendship and harmony with others". (Michele)

Valuing diversity:

"You get the old man and the baby in the pram, the anarchist, the communist and the catholic, absolutely in a non-conflictual manner. There is no difference between the black block and (the old lady) who goes to a demonstration..." (Piero)

Belonging and identity:

"Well, let's say that if I am what I am it's because of training, education and my parents and a lot of other things but it's also thanks to the NT movement. Definitely". (Luca)

Trust:

It makes you trust people you don't know, so... You are more familiar with the idea of being able to change things you don't know and open up, let's say so. (Piero)

Recommendation

Community building strategies should be an integral part of social inclusion policies and the community activities at local level should be intergenerational as much as possible. Local policies should seek to provide opportunities and sites for socialization, leisure and awareness-raising activities in each neighborhood. In urban contexts, neighborhood committees could be created with the aim to create open spaces to give voice to all social sectors and in particular to young people.

2. Provide opportunities for intergenerational exchange

Our research has found that a trustful intergenerational exchange can represent a very effective weapon against the scarce participation of young people in society. Trust-based intergenerational relationships give way to a valuable learning process that can empower young people and encourage them to engage socially. All our young respondents have pointed out the strength they draw from their relationship with the elderly – a truly bi-directional learning process that is based on trust and respect. The young are aware that such relationships are a distinct trait of the No Tav social movement and many recognize that it is vital to the life of the social movement itself as it allows for generational turnover. The elderly also play a key role in helping young people to cope with the stigma and shows them ways to turn it into something positive. As our young respondents report, the fact of feeling trusted and respected by the elderly is not only meaningful to their engagement, as it opens their mind, but it represents also the turning point that convinced many of them to engage actively in the movement. The young activists view such synergy as guaranteeing a twofold approach – the action-oriented and the reflective – which they see as the most effective strategy to achieving social change. Beyond expressing gratitude to the elderly, the young activists are aware that the dynamic synergy between the younger and the older generations is beneficial not only to each of them individually, but also to the overall social movement and ultimately to the whole local society, which is strengthened and becomes more cohesive.

Examples**Shared aims:**

"One of the beautiful aspects of the movement is its being cross-generational (...) Diverse people who, differently from most (...) other cases in this country, succeed in gathering with an aim, with a purpose". (Michele)

Generational turnover:

"They literally walk with us, point the way out for us basically saying that they will come with us up to a certain point so that then we can continue on our own (...). They are holding out their hand, let's take it!" (Francesca)

"There is a big problem of transmission of values from one generation to the next one (...) which does not necessarily mean that you'll have to stay in the Valley for the rest of your life, nor that you'll have to be forever part of the NoTav fight. (...) It means that while you are staying here, there has to be a sparkle, something (...) A baton which fell on the ground for future generations to pick up and take over from there". (Roberto)

Turning point:

"The very fact that I felt involved when I was among people who were older than me, who trusted me. I mean, they wanted me to feel involved and they made me feel as their peer (...) I believe it is like that for all younger people, for all those living here, and this is the starting point..." (Alice)

Recommendation

Youth policies and policies addressing social cohesion should seek to increase opportunities for intergenerational exchange as it allows for a very effective learning process. Although informal, such learning process benefits both the young and the elderly and ultimately contributes to the cohesiveness of society as a whole. Intergenerational exchange should be encouraged at school. Within each neighborhood, initiatives where both the young and older people can best engage with their knowledge and skills should be promoted as benefiting the whole community.

3. Prevent stigmatization

Stigma can have detrimental effects on individuals. On young people, stigma can have particularly damaging effects, as it can affect their social identity and can thus discourage them from participating in society. Even though our young respondents, who are the target of a damaging stigmatization process by mainstream media, have found efficient ways to counteract the negative effects of stigma, they have to cope with it daily. They experience frustration and anger, which they seek to combat by organising information exchange opportunities, in particular for young people. From school to university and in their daily life, the young activists strive to demonstrate that their activities have a much wider scope than simply opposing the State interests. They seek to show that they engage in a wide variety of social issues other than the high-speed railway. By so doing, they hope to achieve two aims: opposing the stigma that labels them as the quintessence of violence, and encouraging more people to mobilize for social change.

Examples

"It was mostly about how the No-Tav were portrayed at that time, like terrorists, black-blocs... (...) If I were to trust the public opinion, possibly I would have never understood anything of the No-Tav movement, what it really was..." (Clara)

"I really was in trouble there, I mean, I felt as though I was living in two different worlds, when I talked about the TAV they all looked at me as though they were saying 'Noooo, such a thing is just not true (...) It's you people in Susa Valley who are crazy'. (...) I wouldn't say justify myself, but I had to give them good reasons. Since then I started to get informed to be able to give a detailed account so that I could also answer (...) and that is how it all started". (Francesca)

"You cannot be a terrorist just because you have different political ideas". (Roberto)

Breaking the stigma:

"To show a 70 years old person throwing a stone or fireworks against institutions, clashes with the imagery of the black block, of the anarchist". (Piero)

Recommendation

Training of journalists is highly recommended and it should aim at guaranteeing that all voices are been heard. Journalists should be encouraged to listen to the young people's voices when writing news regarding them. Showing images that portray exclusively violent young people does not help people to gain an understanding of the various issues; in a society that aims to guarantee expressive plurality, such practice should be limited and balanced with more positive images of young people. Workshops on the effects of stigma and on anti-stigmatization principles and strategies should be organized periodically. Young people's activities aimed at raising awareness on the various social issues they engage in should be supported and promoted in schools, universities and with local committees.

4. Support the participation of young people in society

Our case study demonstrates that young people, even young people labelled as “in conflict” and “violent”, are willing to engage positively in society and mobilize to change things. In our case, the young activists’ social engagement is incredibly high compared to that of the average young people in the rest of the country. The young people seek social change by engaging at all levels – from the small daily choices to political ideology and more serious social and environmental issues. In particular, the attention given by young people to specific topics (e.g., solidarity, sustainable development, social justice) may be an indicator of active participation in society and/or the capability to be promoters of social change/innovation. While constantly repeating the need for everybody to mobilize for social change, the young people clarify that each person should engage in accordance with their own pace and will. Having a good relationship with the community of origin and the older generations, as mentioned above, is key to the young people’s capacity to be promoters of social change. Our young respondents are aware of being a “special” case in the country and they have started to seek exchange opportunities with young people from other areas in order to transfer their experience and sensitize them about the need to mobilize.

Examples

“I believe young people really want to get out of their hideouts and say, well, we are also here and... We want to take part in it, in this process of change!” (Pamela)

“To follow some kind of line of thought in the daily life, the fact that a person can fight for it day by day, simply by discussing with one’s own friends or families, trying to lead a life more coherent with nature”. (Piero)

“Revolution, or any change, can also be brought about by going shopping (...) You can always choose to buy from me. To support me and the land, in order to add value to the whole area, so that it is cared for, monitored and it doesn’t fall apart (...) Another kind of development is possible and it could imply that no other train as fast as TAV should transit”. (Luca)

“It’s something I feel that makes me say, do participate, it’s ok to keep asking questions, it’s ok to work on big issues but do take part actively in everything, it’s essential! There’s the need for something made out of younger people, and it’s crucial that everybody make an effort to do something, even in one’s own small way”. (Francesca)

“It is now a different time, a time when we demand less. Therefore, this is the perfect moment for us to create an idea, or even only inform young people about what is happening [here] but not only about that: about all that is happening in general concerning young people and not, which can be relevant for us”. (Roberto)

“In the very valley where they want to build something useless and devastating, we want to create a different world. We can do it together and we know that all together, all according to one’s own possibility, we are invincible”. (Festival promoters’ website)

Recommendation

Exchange opportunities between young people involved in social movements and other groups of young people should be promoted as potential “innovation incubators”. Exchange opportunities can stimulate reflection on youth participation in society and encourage young people to engage actively in order to address social change. Social policies should deserve more attention to leaving space open for the ideas and the practical contribution of young people in society beyond education and employment, as young people can guarantee a future outlook to societal issues.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on fieldwork conducted between May and December 2017 in the Susa alpine Valley, in the North-East of Italy. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 20 young activists, 9 females and 11 males. All interviews were audio recorded. The age of the interviewees ranged between 18 and 27 years, with the exception of 3 interviewees aged between 30 – 34 years. Contact with the young activists was made through the local branch of a national organization working on the labour market and then through the snowball technique. Participant observation entailed attending formal and informal meetings of the Youth Committee as well as of the overall movement; visits to the key sites; and spending time and sharing meals with many young and less young activists. Other data were collected from field diaries and secondary sources.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement (PROMISE)
COORDINATOR	Dr Jo Deakin, University of Manchester, UK. Jo.deakin@manchester.ac.uk
CONSORTIUM	Raffaele Bracalenti, <i>Istituto Psicoanalitico per le Ricerche Sociali, Italy.</i> r.bracalenti@iprs.it Eckart Müller-Bachmann, <i>Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands e.V., Germany.</i> eckart.mueller-bachmann@cjd-nord.de Zyab Ibanez, <i>Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.</i> zyab.lbanez@eui.eu Raquel Matos, <i>Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal.</i> rmatos@porto.ucp.pt Ivan Chorvát, <i>Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici, Slovakia.</i> Ivan.Chorvat@umb.sk Kaisa Vehkalahti, <i>Finnish Youth Research Network, Finland.</i> kaisa.vehkalahti@youthresearch.fi Annett Wiedermann, <i>YES Forum (Youth and European Social Work), Germany.</i> annett.wiedermann@yes-forum.eu Anna Markina, <i>University of Tartu, Estonia.</i> Anna.Markina@ut.ee Markus Quandt, <i>GESIS - Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften E.V., Germany.</i> Markus.quandt@gesis.org Elena Omelchenko, <i>National Research University, Russia.</i> omelchenko@mail.ru Ben Perasović, <i>Ivo Pilar Institute, Croatia.</i> ben.perasovic@gmail.com

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WEBSITE	http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/newsfeed/
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Eckart Müller-Bachmann (eckart.mueller-bachmann@cjd-nord.de) Alessia Mefalopulos (a.mefalopulos@iprs.it)
FURTHER READING	Mefalopulos, A. (2018) <i>No Tav: Stigma as a drive for social change</i> . Promise case study. http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/No-Tav-stigma-as-a-drive-for-social-change.pdf Iprs (2016). National context report. Italy. Promise project