NEET EMPOWERMENT THROUGH WORK SOCIALISATION.
DOES THE YOUTH GUARANTEE PROGRAMME OFFER REAL OPPORTUNITIES?

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Abstract. In Southern European countries, the long-lasting economic crisis has worsened the already difficult school-to-work transition among new generations, as highlighted by the increasing number of NEETs. The process of work socialisation itself has weakened and young people have been pushed to take on the burden and develop a sort of «auto-socialisation». The European Youth Guarantee Programme (YG) claims to be a successful strategy to improve NEET activation and employment, by promoting individual and professional youth empowerment. But does the YG programme offer a real chance of work socialisation? Work socialisation is intended here as a «capacitating process», capable of taking into account both individual, social and institutional responsibilities in shaping work and life opportunities for young. Focusing on the implementation of YG at the local level in Italy, the paper investigates to what extent the programme actually accomplishes these objectives.

Keywords: NEET, Youth Guarantee Programme, Empowerment, School-to-work transition, Italy.
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I - INTRODUCTION

School-to-work transitions are increasingly challenging for young people. This is one of the most significant consequences of the economic crisis which Europe has been facing for almost 10 years now. Such challenges, moreover, not only reflect the decline of occupational opportunities, but also a weakening – if not the outright failure – of work socialisation (Lodigiani - Santagati 2016). Indeed, for a relevant number of young people, transition can turn into a downright failure in accessing jobs and adult roles, as the NEET
(Not in Education, Employment or Training) experience indicates. Herein stems the growing social and political concern, especially regarding the more vulnerable NEETs, i.e. those most exposed to the risk of social exclusion. In fact, they are not more likely looking for an occupation, given their limited socio-economic resources, scarce qualifications, lack of significant work experiences, and multiple impediments in job-seeking.

After decades of policies which have not been able to tackle training and occupational inequalities, the EU programme Youth Guarantee (YG) has been explicitly introduced to promote youth activation and social and occupational inclusion among young NEETs. The objective of YG is to reduce unemployment and long-term disengagement of young people by supporting the school-to-work transition, offering real job opportunities, job placements and training aimed at increasing youth employability.

Conceptually, the YG programme is framed by the EU «activation paradigm», in continuity with the Lisbon Strategy and the Europe 2020 Programme; both share a promotional approach and value the development of human capital as a lever for social and occupational inclusion. Critical analyses have suggested that this paradigm has tended to consider unemployment and inactivity primarily in terms of labour supply, rather than leaving the dimension of labour demand and structural inequalities in the background. YG, on the other hand, seems to appreciate the interdependence between individual and collective responsibilities in young people's (un)employment, which in turn affect work socialisation. In order to analyse YG at the macro level (the definition of the European strategy), at the meso level (the national and particularly the Italian strategy) and micro level (choices and practices of YG local implementation), it is necessary to explore the coherence between social and political expectations and results obtained by YG, reflecting on whether expectations are:
- justified, starting from the goals of the programme up to the way the NEET condition is politically defined;
- sustained, using the proposed intervention measures (services, tools);
- attributed, in terms of responsibilities to young people, companies, training institutions;
- and acted out in practices.

The paper analyses the Italian Youth Guarantee (IYG) implementation, conducting a theoretical-interpretative analysis of the process put forth to reach the declared objectives in the light of the European framework, in the meanwhile observing it «in practice», in the actual modes of implementation in a regional (Piedmont) and local (Turin) case study. The aim is to understand whether IYG manages to intercept the most disadvantaged young people, promoting their empowerment and «capability» (à la Sen 2000), namely, helping these young people regain the ability to make choices, to act, to exercise self-determination with regards to their work and life ambitions within a «capability building» strategy, which offers occasions of work socialisation.

II - THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From the theoretical standpoint, the study draws on three main approaches. First, following Bonvin and Farvaque (2005), it borrows its conceptual framework from the
capability approach, in order to assess the impact of YG in terms of actual youth activation, empowerment and capabilities. The programme’s goals, and relative measures of intervention are reinterpreted in this perspective, with the aim of highlighting underlying theoretical principles, values and expectations, as well as the implications that shape actual responses. This is done with the awareness that any public policy – from general strategies to single interventions and operational tools – embeds norms and ethical values that shape the issue they aim to address, the order of priorities to be tackled, the criteria of justice and equity adopted, and ultimately determine the outcomes of the policy itself (Bifulco 2014).

Second, the research borrows some analytical and political suggestions from the Transitional Labour Markets approach (TLM) so that to improve YG’s efficacy in sustaining young people’s working (and life) transitions (Gazier - Gautié 2011). It is becoming increasingly evident that the transitions to different working conditions – be it to full or part-time employment, unemployment, inactivity, training or care activities –, are becoming more and more complex and uncertain, and the boundaries among these conditions are getting blurred. Hence, «bridges» between these domains should be built in order to facilitate and protect individual life and occupational trajectories. According to the TLM framework, in order to manage transitions in and out of the labour market, a «transitional system» should be constructed, through institutional arrangements which involve local councils, local stakeholders, profit and non profit organizations, especially at the local level. These institutional arrangements are a means of tackling the issue of social protection from individualized social risks in a solidarity perspective, which implies that different actors have their own set of responsibilities.

Finally, the paper draws on the concept of empowerment, defined as a person’s capacity to make effective choices, to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes (Alsop - Heinsohn 2005). According to this «classical» definition, the degree to which a person is empowered is influenced by two interrelated factors: the personal agency (the capacity to make purposive choice) and the opportunity structure (the institutional context in which the choice is made, that affect the extent to which an actor can actually transform his/her choice into effective action) (ibidem). This dual dimension of empowerment, both individual and contextual, is well suited to rethink the process of work socialisation. Empowerment is connected to socialisation to the extent that this process «constructs» individuals and simultaneously defines institutions (Dubet 2009). Moreover, empowerment is connected to the notion of capability, which insists on the same duplicity of levels in order to evaluate public policies’ ability in promoting social wellbeing. Similarly, empowerment is linked with the TLM approach which conceptualizes the structural dimension of a social context and the involvement of different social and institutional stakeholders as essential for the development of effective labour market policies. Taking into consideration simultaneously different level of analysis, this complex theoretical background gives us the guidelines to specify the research hypothesis and questions for assessing the YG as an empowerment-oriented programme: especially at the macro and meso level (but even at the local one), the formulation of YG goals and target embeds (and sometimes hides) norms and values, principles and social representations about young NEETs and their activation.
These aspects affect the policy implementation and the results obtained producing a gap between formal declarations and enacted choices. Moreover, during the recruiting and profiling phase, the presence of actual space of voices and substantial freedom for the youth may promote their activations fostering their empowerment. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse how the job services and the street level bureaucracy operate. Finally, when and where local institutional and multi-stakeholder arrangements are set up, individual and social responsibilities in front of the NEET phenomena are better balanced, increasing the YG targeting to the more vulnerable among the NEETs, granting them chances of true work socialisation.

III - YOUTH GUARANTEE AND YOUNG NEETS: FROM FORMAL GUARANTEES TO «SUBSTANTIAL FREEDOM»?

NEET represent a paradigmatic case of «blocked transition» (Lodigiani - Santagati 2017). The available statistics and research highlight the heterogeneity of this group, which is evident especially in Southern European countries (Istituto G. Toniolo 2014; Alfieri et al. 2015), encompassing both young people who have not yet found an occupation, those who have abandoned an educational or training project without commencing something anew, people who have made the choice not to take part in any activity, and those who have had to leave their project for various other motives (geographical mobility, illness, family issues etc.; Eurofound 2016). The large heterogeneity of this category is one of the most relevant issues in order to develop appropriate interventions for NEET activation and re-employment (both social and occupational), especially among the more vulnerable and discouraged (Quintano et al. 2018).

As aforementioned, YG involves NEET with the aim of intercepting young people belonging to this varied group. In order to develop a macro-level analysis drawing from a common European framework, we notice there have been different ways of implementing the programme across different countries, with uneven results. In this regard, scholars distinguish between countries following a holistic approach1 and countries who have followed a narrower approach2 (Mascherini - Ledermaier 2016). Italy (like Belgium, Bulgaria and Poland) appears to have taken an intermediate route by addressing employment policies as a starting point to improving links with other policy areas. This has been done with the aim of promoting the widest active participation of young people, building bridges between education system, VET, private companies and the labour market (ibidem).

That this policy aim is to target NEETs is clearly stated also in Italy3, which has acted upon European directives. Even in Italy, YG is geared at constructing a «system of guarantees» for NEETs aimed at ensuring them «a good-quality offer of employ-

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1 Such as France, Ireland, Estonia, where YG is used to improve links between the labour market, education/VET, youth policies and social policies more generally.
2 Such as Spain, the UK and Greece, who have focused predominantly on employment policies.
3 Where the age of the beneficiaries extends up to 29 years.
ment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education\(^4\), with the precise task of protecting and promoting their right to a «decent» job, education or (re)training opportunity. Furthermore, as some young people are particularly disadvantaged or at risk of discrimination, appropriate additional measures are foreseen, all «whilst recognising their individual responsibility in finding a route into economic activity»\(^5\).

The terms «guarantee», on the one hand, refers to the fulfilment of an obligation and to the observation of a certain commitment, which we find explicitly in the aforementioned definition. It sounds as an «ideal promise» (Besamusca et al. 2012) whose efficacy needs to be evaluated on the basis of how and to what extent «the right to a response» can be offered and effectively utilised. On the other hand, in indicating the spectrum of foreseen measures, YG poses the question of the space for substantial personal freedom and of the **voice** given to young people. In other words, ensuring young people have the opportunity of expressing their preferences and participating in the definition of their personal activation project, bearing in mind the circumstances in which they are living. As Sen’s capability approach suggests, this is not only about ensuring equal opportunities of access to the programme and to the measures offered, but also of acting on «contextual» conditions (personal, social and institutional factors). This is in order to ensure beneficiaries have the freedom to choose among the proposed measures, to voice their preferences, to concur to the definition of their activation project, without imposing specific behaviours or «modes of functioning». In other words, it is not enough to offer them resources (formal rights and goods, in this case work and training opportunities), in order to **convert** them in the ability for action and self-determination, using them for their own advantage (e.g., entry in the labour market and rise in employability). As Robeyns (2005) argues, one of the strengths of the capability approach is that it can account for interpersonal variations in the ability to convert the characteristics of commodities into functionings. These interpersonal variations can be due to personal or socio-environmental factors: personal characteristics (e.g., mental and physical conditions, gender, age, literacy, intelligence), social characteristics (e.g., public policies, social norms, discriminating practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies, power relations) and environmental characteristics (e.g., climate, infrastructure, institutions, resources, public goods) influence how a person can convert the commodity/good into a functioning.

Therefore, the effectiveness of YG depends as much on the context’s ability to combine different goals: offering effective and good-quality job and training opportunities; developing interventions and tools which foster individual empowerment and young people’s disposition to activate themselves; trying to improve context conditions. This means promoting at the same time two types of freedom: a) the **opportunity**

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\(^5\) *Ibidem.*
freedom, which demands policies increase the range of opportunities for all interested subjects; b) the processual freedom, which demands subjects be co-constructors of policies as much as possible and involves real opportunities of choice (Bonvin 2006).

At a first level of analysis of the official documentation – both at the European and Italian level – YG appears to be focused on the need to ensure qualitatively adequate job offers, and the possibility of defining individualized projects; the policy, therefore, seems to go in the aforementioned direction. Similarly, these same documents stress the central role of the interdependence between the individual and institutional dimensions, declaring that the programme’s objective is to ensure no young person is left alone and support must be graduated according to everyone’s personal situation. In these official documents, however, and notably in the Italian one, the analysis of the socio-economic causes and political responsibilities surrounding the NEET phenomena remain markedly marginal. The repeated reference to the NEET condition as a consequence of lack of professional experience, of inadequate education/training achievements, of a lack of ability in active job-seeking, tends to emphasise individual responsibilities only, defining young people as «lacking», defective, and less productive (Serracant 2014), thus influencing – in Senian terms – the «informational basis of judgement in justice» (Bonvin - Farvaque 2006) which, in this case, is set as the basis of IYG particularly.

IV - LOOKING AT THE ITALIAN YOUTH GUARANTEE IMPLEMENTATION

According with these premises, in order to proceed in our analysis of IYG, we must move from the level of discourse to that of practice and implementation. From the methodological point of view the argument presented here integrates the secondary analysis of official data/documents relative to the implementation of IYG with a qualitative study (which includes archival material and qualitative interviews and focus group with key informants and in-depth interviews with IYG beneficiaries) on the local implementation of the programme in Piedmont Region, with a focus on Turin. We refer to an on-going research project – «From Neet to need. Participatory processes of work socialization» (2017-19)⁶, funded by Compagnia di San Paolo and promoted by InCreaSe Association – that aims at analysing the biographical conditions of NEETs in Northern Regions (Piedmont, Liguria and Valle d’Aosta) and mapping/evaluating policies, strategies and measures implemented to activate different kind of NEETs, especially the most disadvantaged ones. In the first exploratory phase, the investigation questions are: who are the real beneficiaries of IYG? How do NEETs are represented by policy actors? What are the main policies/strategies and measures for NEETs? What are the effects of these policies on young people in the territorial areas considered? In the first year (2017/18),

we collected 31 life stories of NEETs (aged 16-29), 28 semi-structured interviews with key informants and we carried out 5 focus groups with 37 participants involved in IYG implementation and in other public/private interventions for NEETs.

Considering only IYG implementation, there is already a large body of data and literature that highlights the problems connected to the implementation of the programme, whose first stage ended during 2017. They marked local differences due to the delays, inefficiencies or inadequacies of employment services, which suffered difficulties in creating partnerships with local companies, in recruitment, in ensuring quality offers in the given time frame, and especially in reaching out to the more disadvantaged and less motivated young people (Isfol 2016). More specifically, critical aspects in the IYG implementation can be subsumed in two groups.

(1) The emphasis on the aim of re-activating the most fragile and disadvantaged subjects struggles to translate into reality. Among the young people recruited by IYG, as both data and key informants interviewed suggest, there has been a reduced participation among the most disadvantaged. This policy has been defined as a «blanket that covers everything in that age range», in the absence of other resources for youth unemployment more generally, but which has reached only the «best performing» subjects (those who were more qualified, competent, employable), increasing the marginality of their weaker counterparts. Therefore, such a policy turns out to be, in a way, «insignificant» for the declared target group of more disadvantaged NEETs. This is not only a communication and information distribution problem. If capabilities represent the set of «substantial freedom» that a person must choose and act, to realize those functionings he/she gives value to, these young people’s marginal condition (with respect to the VET and labour market system) compresses the space of expectations where IYG can represent an opportunity for personal realization. This is an issue of great relevance, in terms of the programme’s «recruitment strategies», which must accompany young people to be proactive, over and beyond their spontaneous application. The issue of profiling and pre-recruitment is particularly delicate, as it risks being a mere bureaucratic act rather than an opportunity for a new encounter, to express one’s skills and aspirations, and to take advantage of professional and career counselling. In practice, there is still a lack of differential needs-based approaches, of specific training based on the required professional skills, and of work-based experiences geared towards obtaining a qualification (European Commission 2015).

(2) Job offers do not appear to always have the necessary quality requirements; apprenticeship and traineeship proposals sometimes conceal subordinate positions; various apprenticeship announcements lack clear training content, as underlined also in our interviews by some key informants (Tiraboschi 2015). Indeed, despite the agreements between the Labour Ministry and employers’ organizations, the collaboration with private businesses for job offers which are in line with the aims of IYG is still lacking. There have also been various examples of distorted uses of the programme, with cases of companies selecting trainees/workers with characteristics for participation in IYG and then suggesting they enrol in the programme in order to take advantage of the available incentives. There have been so-called «opportunities» which young people have had to «endure», imposed and distorted by companies looking for «low-cost labour», rather
than options young people could seize and develop in a broader and more systemic collaboration between them and the employers. On the other hand, these analyses highlight companies’ difficulties not only in offering job opportunities, but also in feeling part of the programme as co-actors and stakeholders in policy making – as the transitional labour market paradigm would indicate – reiterating the need for a collective management of transitions in order to develop a new form of labour protection (Gazier et al. 2014). As underlined by the key informants interviewed, in assuming young NEETs to be a disadvantaged and lacking category, and in rewarding companies with bonuses and incentives if they open their doors to them, moreover, IYG risk to produce an unexpected counter-effect: legitimating companies in taking young people’s scarce productivity/skills for granted, with negative effects on socialisation process and on the professional growth trajectories that these same businesses could/should offer.

V - THE PIEDMONT CASE: EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE

The Piedmont and Turin case study further allows us to shed light on the micro-analysis of the implementation of IYG at the local level, given the interesting regional objective of developing an integrated system of services and support within which to invest IYG funds, recruit different stakeholders, and transforming the implementation plan in-progress in order to reach particularly disadvantaged young people.

Overall, since September 2014, Piedmont Region has used IYG funds to develop: labour services, 1- and 2-year VET programmes for young drop-outs, the National Civil Service, plus some extraordinary projects for guidance counselling, traineeships and work/training, and specific actions for young people with disabilities. In this first stage what has not received funding are occupational bonuses given directly to private companies. Due to its initial results – such as reduced percentage of recruitments, scarce involvement of more disadvantaged young people, reduced job placements – in March 2016 Piedmont began a new phase of the IYG implementation. This new phase aimed at strengthening the Youth Corner network, public and private services (within youth centres, job centres and other organizations), aimed at «giving young people space», offering them free access to various events and informative/orienteering meetings. These specialized spaces for young people have sought to facilitate young people’s access to IYG – as witnessed from some key informants of Turin public employment services –, thanks to personalized support from registration to information on the programme. Access, likewise, has been changed: up to February 2016 only those young people who, at the end of the selection and matching phase, were chosen to take part in funded projects, were recruited by the programme. Later, Piedmont Region suggested recruitment to the programme begins at the moment young people enrolled on the site, and every recruit be assigned a single contact person present at a regional (public or accredited private) Youth Corner which, for three months, would be responsible for offering recruits training activities, traineeships or job opportunities. At the end of this period, the young person would once again be contacted, and more guidance activities offered. Especially in the case of Turin, this transformation of the intervention
sought to develop greater coordination among services, albeit in the difficulty of reaching set aims and objectives. Indeed, as various key informants suggested, «in a period of structural uncertainties, it is necessary to have a reciprocal exchange of experiences and competences which could create a positive feedback cycle», not only for young NEETs, but for the whole system of labour services, who is called upon to take on a more important role in policy development, by recruiting people in need.

Innovations include the fact that public funding, granted via the INPS\(^7\) to cover traineeship allowances, has been reduced to three months (rather than six months as originally planned), and companies have been asked to cover the reimbursement of half the costs, in order to increase awareness on the importance of traineeships and foster an investment on young people with a longer-term project. Given that traineeships, as a measure, have not always been used properly, and in order to avoid the risk of companies employing young people for an excessively short period of time, Piedmont Region (with its stakeholders) decided to exclude part-time contracts and offers lasting less than six months, with the aim of increasing the quality of training offers and ensuring these can turn into real professional opportunities. What is emerging is the possibility of offering companies «conditional incentives». This is indicated also by our interviewees, as a need to control those who use public funding, via a good monitoring system which can highlight an incorrect use of resources, fake traineeships, a wrongful selection of candidates etc. Among the modifications of the programme in Piedmont and implemented in Turin, moreover, we should mention YG for young people with Disabilities, aimed at developing active labour policies, whose objective is to foster – via professional experiences - socio-occupational inclusion through specialized guidance action, professional experiences, job accompaniments, active job-seeking and tutoring upon entry in private companies.

It is therefore possible to observe that these innovations introduced have gone in the direction of strengthening empowerment through IYG, in both individual and environmental terms, with the realization of «good practices» – or at the very least as promising practices, which may offer useful guidelines for other contexts, such as:

1) Youth Corners, managed by public and private services, organized to give young people voice and space to express themselves;

2) personalised recruitment among young people enrolled in the programme, with a single contact person, in-depth skill assessment and immediate matching between young people’s profiles and available opportunities;

3) forfeiting occupational bonuses for companies, part time contracts and excessively short traineeships. Companies have been led to behave as stakeholders of YG – and not clients – in the policy implementation;

4) paying attention to those who are more fragile and developing specific actions for young people with disabilities.

\(^7\) Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale, that is the National Institute of Social Security.
If reinterpreted considering the theoretical background described above, the choices and practices which are being implemented in Turin, according to the strategy defined at the regional (Piedmont) level, compared to the national framework, appear to be particularly geared to develop empowerment opportunities for young people who are more disadvantaged and disengaged. These are choices and practices which still need to be studied through empirical research, but which — according to the empirical evidence till now collected — seem to be able to strengthen this policy’s empowerment-orientation. All the innovations introduced enforce the ability of YG to ensure at the local level those conditions which may enable the development of individual agency among the more vulnerable and inactive youth, opening up spaces where their voice may be heard, asking for greater involvement among companies, in order to bridge the gap which separates new generations from the most significant spaces of inclusion in school, training and work.

VI - CONCLUDING REMARKS

The capability approach teaches us that working is part of «doing» and enables us to reach those objectives we give value to. Effective labour policies require the adoption of a dynamic perspective, which can follow individual trajectories overcoming rigid and bureaucratic classifications, in order to ensure the capacities to achieve and maintain a job over time (Leonardi 2009). As our macro analysis suggests, IYG could have intervened (and could still) supporting and giving value to those transitions that characterize personal and occupational biographies with new rights and «transitional» measures (Gazier et al. 2014), but the final goal has not always been reached. No doubt the integration of active labour market policies for young people with training, social and development policies need to be strengthened, in order to make school-to-work transition faster and easier for all, especially for the more disadvantaged and disengaged. To reach this objective, besides a greater economic investment and a qualitative/organizational improvement of public and private employment services (nonetheless still a major issue in the Italy), a wide-ranging cultural reform is required. Drawing on IYG as the point of departure leads to the recognition and attribution of responsibilities for young people’s work socialisation both to training institutions – who are called upon to open up and enter into a dialogical exchange with the labour market, offering high quality training programmes – and to private companies, on whom young people depend upon in terms of job offers, on-the-job training opportunities, and long-term professionalising career.

In this perspective, work socialisation can be redefined as that process aimed at developing an «occupational capability» which enables the subject to pursue his or her objectives and values, within an inclusive social context which fosters participation and independence. In order to convert work socialisation into a capacitating process, as a lifelong and reflexive learning process built within many transitions, the individualistic perspective needs to be eschewed. Encouraging businesses and training institutions to consider themselves as stakeholders in the development of labour market policies, con-
sidered here as agent for socialisation, and to converge around values, meanings and practices that promote young people’s employment opportunities, listening to them and, especially, considering them as competent actors.

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