

INTRODUCTION

This paper has two main aims:

- to outline an approach that can be used in analysing the position of young people in different national settings; and
- to link such an analysis to the development of national youth strategies and policies.

The second of these two aims is crucial. The assumption underpinning this paper is that national youth strategies and policies which are not grounded in an understanding of the position young people occupy will be at best an irrelevance, and at worst a liability.

This paper does not, and cannot, provide a step-by-step guide to the development of national youth strategies and policies for young people. Such strategies and policies, and the process followed to develop them, will vary for different nations and for different groups of young people.

Even the very idea of 'youth' varies between different countries. One of the themes identified below is concerned with the extent to which youth, as a stage of life in relation to which strategies and policies can be developed, can be said to exist in a particular national setting. And if it does exist, which young people does it exist for and how are they identified? It is questions such as these, rather than answers, which constitute the core of the approach provided in this paper.

This approach, however, is more than just a series of questions. For the questions help offer a perspective and provide a way of thinking about young people and their societies. The questions are intended to connect to the experience and concerns of the reader. This 'way of thinking' is to consistently relate the questions and perspective to the position of young people and the characteristics of the societies in which they live.

The approach outlined in the paper is only one part of a wider and much more complex process. The creation of policy is essentially a political process involving the exercise of political power and the allocation of scarce resources. Any understanding of the position of young people and the creation of strategy and policy will need subsequently to connect to, and interact with, the wider political processes of policy determination and resource allocation. In doing this

it will inevitably be modified, if not compromised. Such modification does not necessarily represent failure.

The development of youth strategies and policies must be conducted within the context of a broad understanding of the potential and resources which exist in national settings, and be aware of the competition between groups making claims on those resources. By following through the thinking process which is presented here, those with an interest in young people and a responsibility to promote their concerns will be better equipped to engage in these wider processes.

The paper has five sections. First, the main themes of the paper, which are concerned with young people, their societies, and the process of change, are described. This is followed by the identification of some commonly held, but mistaken, assumptions about young people and their societies. The next section considers the international context which helps determine patterns of national development. Although this may seem rather remote from young people, international relations have an increasing influence on how individual countries are changing and the circumstances of young people within them. The focus then shifts in some detail to the national context and identifies the main national social structures, systems and institutions which help shape the lives of young people. The final section highlights some implications for the development of national youth strategies and identifies some of the elements which may help constitute a youth policy.