



4 THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The national context is primary in understanding the position of young people. The main structures, systems and institutions which constitute this national context are considered below. The first task, however, is to highlight certain issues which need to be kept in mind when considering that national picture.

One of the major issues is that of transformation, and especially transformation brought about through economic development. In one sense countries are always changing, for economic development is a continuing process. Some changes, though, are more profound in their impact than others. Perhaps the greatest impact arises from the change from a subsistence to a wage economy and, often associated with this, from an agricultural to an industrial economy. In many instances a national economy will be characterised by sectors in decline as new ones emerge.

These types of changes often have significant implications for young people. The shift from a rural to an urban society is a case in point. Young people can often be in the forefront of migration towards cities - although not necessarily voluntarily, and not necessarily with positive intentions or beneficial consequences. Changes of this type can mean that young people occupy a different place, economically and socially, from that occupied by their parents and grandparents. The particular type of transformation, and its impact on young people, will vary between countries.

National images of youth can also be influenced by wider changes. As young people become detached from the more traditional customs of their societies it is more likely that they will be seen as a problem rather than a resource. This image of young people helps determine what might be called the national climate, which will be more or less sympathetic and supportive of them. Yet rarely is there a systematic attempt to understand this national image:

- what is it?
- who creates it?
- what events helped influence and shape it?
- what follows from it both for young people and for others?

The final issue to be identified is concerned with degrees of access to social and economic resources, which include such things as jobs, housing and education. Different groups have more or less access to such resources. Young people's access will often differ from that of other age groups, and there are likely to be differences between different groups of young people.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Social structures, in this context, refer to the main ways in which societies are organised. The principal building blocks of social structures are usually, though not exclusively, class, gender and race. It needs to be remembered, however, that different societies will be structured in different ways, and in some one or more of these features will be more significant than others.

The nature and degree of significance of each is a matter for investigation, not assumption. Some societies will be more divided along class lines than others; gender will have a different significance according to the society; racial or ethnic divisions will differ enormously; while caste may be a characteristic feature in other cases.

Divisions related to age are more difficult to deal with. The extent to which age becomes a principal mode of division will depend on factors which are beyond the scope of this discussion, but in one point age is clearly different from the others. Everyone will pass through and move beyond age divisions.

For the individuals concerned, any age divisions will be transient ones - they will move beyond them. The young will get older, but men don't become woman or black people turn white. But if there are consistent and enduring age divisions, there may well be enduring consequences for the organisation of the society and for the position of young people collectively. The existence of structured age divisions can have important consequences for youth policy.

ECONOMY, SOCIETY, POLITICS AND THE LAW

Economic, social, political and legal systems will help shape and determine the social forms taken by class, gender and race, and will influence the ways in which these divisions are expressed and experienced. There is a problem, however, in trying to identify systems which can be unambiguously understood and applied across a range of societies. What is the content of each system, and how do the boundaries of each become drawn?

The concept of the family provides a clear example of this difficulty. In most Western societies the family is seen as part of the social system. It has become a unit of consumption in that resources are brought into the family and used - for subsistence, pleasure, or comfort. To engage in productive activities individuals leave the family and go out to work.

Now this division and distinction will not hold true for all societies or even all families. In some cases the family may be both a unit of consumption and the basis of production. Productive enterprises, such as agriculture or small manufacturing, may be based on the family and located in or around the domestic household. In these cases it may be more useful to see the family as part of an economic system. In considering these systems, it is necessary to investigate how a system relates to the particular society, where the boundaries of it are seen to lie, and what can be counted as part of it. Such an investigation requires consideration of some of the main institutions which generally fall within the boundaries of each of the systems.

Understanding the connections and relationships between young people and these institutions will provide a consistent and systematic way of understanding the position young people occupy in any particular society.

WORK, INCOME AND PROPERTY

Three institutions can be identified which have the main economic impact within a society. They are:

- work;
- income and wealth; and
- property and land.

Work, along with employment, defines the way in which the great

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majority of people make a living. It can be conducted in many ways, such as:

- working within the family in exchange for board and lodging or a wage;
- working on one's own in a self-employed capacity; or
- working for an employer.

The worker may own the tools and materials with which the work is done, or they may be owned by someone else. The work may be done on the land as in agriculture, it may be done in an urban factory as with much manufacturing, or it may be done elsewhere such as sea fishing or working in service industries like hotels and catering. If jobs are not available, and there is no alternative such as family work, then unemployment, and no income, are the likely consequences.

Different societies organise things differently and this has consequences for young people. The age at which employment can begin, rules about minimum wages, health and safety and the extent to which employment guarantees security are different in many countries. Similarly, there are great differences in the extent to which progression to better jobs or more highly paid employment is possible, for in many societies those jobs simply do not exist. In other words, an important component of economic institutions is the occupational structure of the society. This affects young people.

The structure of the society will also be a powerful determinant of experience. While young people as a group tend to have different forms of access to work and employment than adults, access and roles also differ between young people. Jobs for the boys are usually different from jobs for the girls. In some societies black young people find it very difficult to get certain kinds of jobs compared with their white counterparts. Middle class young people will often find it easier to get good jobs than their working class contemporaries. All of these factors influence and determine the experiences of young people and define the nature of their circumstances and conditions.

The second cluster of economic institutions is concerned with income and wealth. Most income will come from employment. Different types of work offer different financial rewards, but young people usually earn less than adults. Where paid work is not available then the informal economy can provide a living through casual labour or activities often on the edges of legality. Otherwise, where it is available, young people will be dependent upon some form of state welfare benefit. All societies will contain some level of poverty,

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notwithstanding debates about how you measure it, and in some societies it will bear heavily on the backs of the young.

The idea of wealth is slightly different from that of income. Wealth can be thought of as money in the bank or something equivalent to that, whereas income, generally wages, is money usually exchanged for work and labour. Income can be derived from wealth in a variety of ways, but for the purpose of understanding the position of young people it is of little direct importance because not many young people hold wealth of any great magnitude. Wealth holdings may, of course, be of very great indirect importance because, generally, people with wealth also have power and very often they have the power to determine the access of others to resources and rewards.

Societies are vastly different in their levels of wealth and income. What is considered ordinary in rich western nations may represent undreamed of riches in other countries, but it should be remembered that virtually all countries have great disparities in access to income and in wealth-holdings - even the poorest countries often have very wealthy elite groups. The same factors which govern access to jobs will govern access to income and, generally, to wealth-holding too. Income, in particular, is of great importance in understanding the position of young people in a society.

The final cluster of economic institutions is concerned with property and land. Although it is unusual for young people to have access to the ownership of property and land at an early stage in their lives, the pattern of ownership within their country can have significant implications for the opportunities which are eventually open to them. Ownership may be linked to accommodation needs, or it may be linked to production in some way. Both are important and connect to different needs.

In some societies acquisition of land, usually through the family, may be an important staging post on the route to adulthood. During periods of economic change, however, the role of land ownership within a society may change. The process of urbanisation usually diminishes the significance of small scale land ownership as its economic purpose declines and, increasingly, access to income takes place through paid employment.

The two elements of land and property tenure patterns which are probably the most important are:

- the overall pattern of land and property ownership; and

- the degree to which direct individual inheritance of productive land or property is a feature of the society.

The ownership of productive land and property are important aspects of the possession of power and influence and these, as with other forms of wealth, can have wider consequences for others living in the society.

EDUCATION, THE FAMILY AND RELIGION

Alongside economic institutions, and often closely linked to them, are the social institutions of the society. For the purposes of discussing and understanding the position of young people, three sets of institutions have been identified as the most important. These are:

- the family;
- the formal provision of education; and
- the religious context.

The family and the wider kinship system in many ways constitute the most basic building blocks of society. Families are a central life experience of young people, being simultaneously both the most important resource they have and also the most significant constraint. They probably represent the single most important influence on the development of young people, yet families can take many different forms and have different roles in the wider society.

Families can vary between the nuclear family, made up of parents and offspring only, extended families which include several generations, and families which are part of a more communal approach to the organisation of domestic life. Similarly, families have differing roles in different societies. For present purposes, the most important distinction is between the idea of families having only a major role in consumption, and those forming the basis production and subsistence activities.

An additional consideration revolves around the extent to which former family functions have now been taken over by other institutions - very often the state, and the wider transition from a society organised around familial rights and duties to one where civic rights and duties predominate - the transition to citizenship which was discussed earlier.

In considering the position of young people it is important to develop an understanding of both the position of the family in the society, and of the position of young people in the family. The type of questions that need to be asked about the family include:

- to what degree is the family engaged in production rather than consumption?
- how are productive resources such as land passed between generations?
- to what extent do civic duties take precedence over familial duties?
- how and in which ways is the family a resource for, or a constraint on, young people?
- is the form and structure of the family stable and fulfilling its role?
- is it adequately meeting the development needs of young people?
- what form do intergenerational conflicts and divisions take?

The second main social institution which has a great effect on young peoples' lives is education. Opportunities for education are one of the greatest resources which can be made available to young people and the experience of education can help transform the life opportunities open to them.

As societies have developed they have tended to create specialised institutions equipped to provide educational opportunities for young people. Educational institutions differ between countries in a great many respects and it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify more than a small number of key questions:

- does a developed education system exist?
- is it open to all or is it selective?
- at what age is it available and how much do you get?
- how well do different groups of young people fare within the education system?

- does the experience of education equip young people for the world they enter on completing their education?

The final area for consideration in this section is the religious context. The significance of religion varies enormously. There are societies where the significance of religion appears to have declined over many years and which are now largely secular. In other countries there is no separation between religion and the state and religious belief permeates many, if not all, aspects of life. In the majority of countries the significance of religion will be between these two outer points.

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In considering the significance of religion it is important not to understate its continuing influence among the people of many countries. In some countries religious influence is readily apparent. In others, which may be thought more secular, religion still remains significant.

In many European countries, for example, the Catholic Church still has a profound and enduring influence which affects the lives of a great many young people. In thinking about the implications for young people all religions must be considered, for what is important in this respect are the social consequences of, rather than the content of, the belief and whether it is one which you personally subscribe to or approve of.

Finally, religion can both unite and divide societies. There are societies where one dominant religion exerts a powerful unifying force which draws together, at least in terms of religious belief, the whole population. Other societies can be strongly divided and in conflict, with religious divisions often playing a significant part in the history and continuation of the dis-harmony. In all of these circumstances young people will be greatly influenced and the role of religion in their lives must be understood.

CONSENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This section is concerned with the broader political arrangements of society. Political arrangements can mean two things:

- the formal ways in which a society organises its decision making processes and the exercise of political power; and
- the more informal sense where power is exercised but not necessarily through the medium of formal institutions.

In this latter sense, all arrangements, the family for example, can be seen as political arrangements. The questions to be posed here are quite simple, but potentially controversial - for questions of politics, tied inextricably to issues of power, never fail to generate great debate and emotion.

The first issue that needs to be addressed concerns the nature of the political institutions:

- is the political system and the kinship or family system fused or separated?
- to what extent are the political institutions representative of the population as a whole?
- what level of accountability to the population exists?

The general question, then, is over the nature of the political institutions, whilst the specific question concerns their relationship to young people and the level of access which young people have to them. This is an important area when considering the degree to which young people can effectively participate in the broader decisions which influence their own lives.

A second issue concerns the possession of political power and how it connects to other institutions within the society:

- who occupies the seats of power?
- how are these people related to the holders of other types of power?

For young people, and for everyone else for that matter, these questions relate to the possibilities of either achieving positions of power themselves, or at least of ensuring that they are occupied by people sympathetic to their cause.

The final issue concerns the level of popular involvement in the political process and the extent to which national politics reflect popular consent:

- to what extent is government performed through popular involvement, and with popular consent?

- do young people have an active role?
- are they part of any popular movement in the political process?

Levels of involvement and consent are always structured and restricted in a variety of ways - government would probably be impossible if this were not the case. Yet, in some countries, involvement and consent are clearly more restricted than in others, and the means by which involvement and consent are mobilised can differ significantly as well.

RIGHTS, ENFORCEMENT AND MORALITY

The final area to be considered for the way in which it influences the lives of young people is the law. Generally, within any national body of law there will be laws which define the scope of young people's lives. These laws define rights, duties and obligations and are very closely tied to the development of citizenship.

Included in such legal frameworks may be laws specifying ages at which compulsory education starts and finishes, minimum ages of paid employment, and the ages at which activities such as driving, drinking alcohol, or smoking tobacco become legally permissible. Many other areas of life will be defined by legal statute in this way.

The questions that need to be addressed include:

- to what extent has a legal framework defining rights and duties and imposing constraints according to age been developed within a society?
- what areas of life does this framework cover?
- what is the content of each of the areas?

In the area of education, for example, some societies might start compulsory education at age four, whereas others might start at eight. Similarly, the age of leaving education will differ.

In thinking about the legal framework, though, there is a further issue - that of enforcement, or the extent to which laws are followed. It tells us little about the position of young people to read that they are required to receive ten years of formal education if we also know that the law is widely disregarded, or that the resources to provide it simply do not exist. The degree to which a law can be considered to be a real law should always be kept in mind when considering the legal framework surrounding young people.

One final consideration in respect of the law concerns the extent to which legal definitions are accepted by others, and whether these definitions come into conflict with other, perhaps more traditional, ways of seeing things. For example, the fact that the law might allow young people to drink alcohol or consent to sexual relations at certain ages does not mean that adults willingly accept the new rights their offspring are acquiring. In both of these cases, and many others, there are clear conflicts over the extent to which, and ways in which, young people are morally permitted to exercise their rights.