

Editorial

Hans-Uwe Otto, Bielefeld University

The Collaborative Research Project “Making Capabilities Work” (WorkAble), funded by the EU within the Seventh Framework Programme, was initiated in response to the way in which a high level of youth unemployment has become a stable feature throughout Europe.¹ This feature is impacting on all countries without exception—although varying in its degree. The situation is particularly dramatic when the youth unemployment rate is higher than that of all other employees. This has justifiably led to a public call for radical change—a call always expressed with concern but sometimes also with aggression. It is not unjustified to talk about a lost generation, and this description applies particularly to southern and eastern European countries. However, alongside the contemporary situation, what we are really dealing with here is fundamental questions of justice that even the EU is now beginning to address in its official papers and policy statements.

There are a host of reasons for these problem constellations facing job-seeking youth. They range from structural rifts as a result of the European fiscal crisis, across the traditional forms of employment and training for youth, up to the acquisition of insufficient knowledge at school. Although descriptions of the problem have now elicited an almost overwhelming mass of argumentative conflict analyses, these have not led to any improvements for the youth concerned. Indeed, one can take the opposite position and argue that their general situation has deteriorated even further. Against this background, all the different training initiatives merge into a far-reaching lack of any prospects for the group of vulnerable youth. The present project has particularly identified the following target groups: early school leavers, the young unemployed and young adults with no secondary education qualifications (and as part of a theoretical and contrastive sampling, unemployed young higher education graduates as well). The current educational and welfare regimes are broadly incapable of opening up new opportunities for these target groups by introducing the necessary innovations that would extend individual capabilities and provide the structural opportunities for their realization.

¹ The consortium of the EU collaborative project „Making capabilities work“ (**WorkAble**): Hans-Uwe Otto, Holger Ziegler, Alkje Sommerfeld, Thomas Ley (*Bielefeld University*); Marek Kwiek, Piotr W. Juchacz (*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*); Sławomir Mandes, Karolina Sztandar-Sztanderska, Marianna Zielenska (*University of Warsaw*); Lavinia Bifulco, Carlotta Mozzana, Raffaele Monteleone, Irene Rolfini (*University of Milano-Bicocca*); Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti, Paola Alessia Shintu (*University of Pavia*); Josiane Vero, Marion Lambert, Isabelle Marion, Thierry Berthet, Véronique Simon (*CEREQ: Centre for Research on Qualifications, Marseille and Bordeaux*); Niels Rosendal Jensen, Christian Christrup Kjeldsen, Dirk Michel Schertges (*Aarhus University, Copenhagen*); Bettina Haidinger, Ruth Kasper (*FORBA: Working Life Research Centre, Vienna*); Jean-Michel Bonvin, Maël Dif-Pradalier; Emilie Rosenstein (*University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland, Lausanne*); Ronald McQuaid, Valerie Egdell (*Edinburgh Napier University*); Mattias Strandh (*Umeå University*); Regine Schröer, Gabriele Pedrini (*BBJ Consult AG, Brussels*); Björn Halleröd, Gunilla Bergström (*University of Gothenburg*)

WorkAble has set itself the goal of performing a problem-oriented analysis of youth unemployment and acquiring the necessary knowledge for a broader clarification of what we need to know. On the one hand, it is performing analyses of longitudinal EU-SILC and other data, in combination with in-depth analyses of specific countries and comparative analyses of pairs of countries. On the other hand, it is carrying out qualitative case studies in the following nine countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK (Scotland).

Each of these countries reveals substantial problems with its specific welfare systems, education systems, and labour market policies. These simultaneously mark the major approaches to handling the problems facing the vulnerable youth that the project is examining as they go through their transition from school to work. The first step in the in-depth analysis of the transition systems set up in these countries is to build up a comprehensive description of the forms of organization and the accompanying approaches to solve the problem. However, the focus of research is on a more far-reaching qualitative analysis of the activities in each of the nine countries that can be described as model projects. These should specify conditions more precisely. The empirical analysis is based on the Capability Approach, drawing particularly on the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This proposes an alternative information base for judging life prospects. The question of a good or happy life is not conceived in the hedonistic-utilitarian tradition as an individual state of inner satisfaction, but as being part of a practical way of life. The Capability Approach analyses the specific interplay between subjects' characteristics, abilities, and needs in the sense of optimizing their agency through objective (social and political) givens and potentials within the framework of institutional and material conditions. Its goal is to make actors capable of conceiving a life that they can value for good reasons. Such capabilities or "real freedoms" cannot be reduced to individual traits, dispositions, or competencies, but point to the complex interplay of infrastructures, resources, rights, and capabilities. *Successful* relations of this kind will deliver the necessary knowledge on *appropriate* transition systems. The project is examining how far each model succeeds in extending the real scope for decision making and autonomy in those concerned rather than just getting the actors to engage in lifestyles and activities whose content is fixed in advance. It is only when this approach succeeds that new chances will open up for vulnerable youth to engage in social self-realization, to overcome both qualitatively and substantially the human capital approach with its fixation on an employability framework, and to become able to function within the increasingly flexibilized labour markets in line with their own wishes and with viable chances of success.

In the present project, the capability approach will be applied as an evaluative framework in which the application of indicators will follow central benchmarks, namely, the capabilities for education, work, and voice. The background to the Capability Approach is always formed by a justice theory framework directed towards what is particularly important for the population under study: namely, that all persons have the freedom to exploit alternatives to those possibilities of reproduction that have either been assigned to them or that they have chosen for themselves. It is only when this stage is achieved that the transition system can be assigned a quality in the sense of a more far-reaching definition of well-being that makes capabilities and the chances for their realization into the overarching content of the opportunities available to youth. The Capability Approach will also make it possible to develop an explicit normative framework that integrates the necessary dimensions of good and meaningful work, a broader understanding of education, and a democratization of social service organizations.

“Making Capabilities Work” is the first empirical project to pursue a justice theory perspective on a European level and thus be also to contribute to a fundamental change in the currently mostly insufficient attempts within the human capital approach to use the labour market to ensure desired lifestyle forms and a secure income for vulnerable youth.

Author’s Address:

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Hans-Uwe Otto
Bielefeld University/ Bielefeld Center for Education and Capability Research
P.O. Box 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
Germany
Tel: ++49 521 106 3308
Email: huotto@uni-bielefeld.de