# National
# **POLICY**BRIEF

## PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: ITALY (1 OF 2)

**Artistic/Creative Start-Ups in the Suburbs of Naples**

**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 a group of young people from the most marginalised suburbs of Naples who engaged in society to 'steal' the youngest generations from criminality and give a chance to their future as well as to that of the whole local society.

This policy brief is concerned with the strategies and dynamics that allow young people labelled as "troubled", "losers", and "hopeless" to actively engage in society, turning the stigma into a positive value and a powerful drive for social change. Our research has found that troubled and marginalised young people can engage positively in society if they are given the opportunity to experience positive educational relationships that do not deny the young people's marginalised background and culture. In our case-study, the encounter with trustful adults and the opportunity to access "risky" artistic activities (such as circus and theatre) were key factors that led the "troubled" young people to drive social change in their neighbourhoods.

The policy recommendations are directed towards:
- National policy makers, particularly those in the education sector;
- Local authorities;
- School teachers; youth workers and social workers;
- Other policy actors engaged with youth work.

The aim of the recommendations is to:

- Raise awareness on the factors that prevent young people from marginalised urban areas to engage positively in school and in society; and encourage the adoption of educational measures alternative to the formal school system;

- Stimulate a debate on the innovation potential of marginalised young people and particularly of young people from the poorest suburbs of large cities;
- Encourage investment in the most marginalised urban areas and encourage the adoption of measures addressing youth from these areas.

## KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Trust is key to an effective education

Most of our respondents have experienced school as the place where marginalisation and stigma are reinforced. The lack of positive and trustful relationships were the major factors preventing them from engaging positively into school career. Additionally, time spent in school was time stolen from more economically "productive" activities (e.g., drug dealing) and was therefore experienced as a waste of time. The encounter with trustful adults and the establishment of the positive relationships that derived from it was to our young respondents a totally new experience and the decisive turning point that marked a clear distance between "before" and "after" in their lives.

### Examples

**School teachers:**

"For me, well… schools may as well all close down. Life is my school! Living in this world, the universe, is a university. If you don't live, you don't learn…Have you ever heard a teacher at school say: 'What's missing from your life? How would you like school to improve that for you?'…There's no time for improvement. There's no time for taking care of us, for relationships". (Matteo)

**Building positive relationships:**

"I would have liked to have had him (Gianluca) for a dad, that's for sure. My decision to come back here stemmed from the fact that I wanted to spend more time with him and learn from him…" (Paolo)

"By that point I trusted him (Gianluca) so whatever he suggested, I'd do it! Bungee Jumping? Ok, tell me when! Swimming? Let's go! Anything would have been fine. I trusted him and believed in what he said!" (Andrea)

### Recommendation:

Educational relationships can be extremely effective when young people encounter trustful adults. Trust relations are key to education. The failure of formal education paths (e.g., school drop-out) does not necessarily entail that young people are not interested in, or capable of, undertaking an educational path. Youth policies, and local youth practices, should support opportunities for non-formal education based on trust.

### 2. Young people's life experiences should be valued

Our research has found that the negative values, role models and habits learnt from living in the neighbourhood can become crucial in the development of the individual identity and sense of belonging of the young people who grew up in harsh environments (e.g., in the absence of caring relationships and with scarce economic and social resources). The pack mentality and the years spent in street gangs have led our young respondents to develop a strong sense of belonging that can be effectively transferred from their street gang to the whole local community, provided that the young people feel free to maintain the values, role models and habits they know best. Without denying their troubled pasts, the young street artists addressed by our research have effectively learned to use their street origin as an asset, something they

share with the younger generations they wish to involve in their arts projects. The adoption of the street language and codes, as well as the use of artistic activities that entail risk and danger, is crucial in order for them to attract the younger generations and create an environment where they feel confident and empowered. By so doing, the young people's identity is valued not denied, and the stigma of marginality becomes a strength by which they aim to achieve a cultural change in society.

**Examples**

**Adopting the young people's codes:**
"These are kids who are constantly at-risk, even when they're not doing anything, simply because of the context they come from. So we transformed that risk from a negative one to a positive one: they have to take risks, do risky circus things like aerial silks or parkour but with positive connotations. That's what we work on". (Marcello)

"One day this little group came along to teach circus skills. I went out and was intrigued by all the things they were doing. One was on stilts, another was juggling clubs, balls… I went up to them because I wanted to try! And I liked it… it was fantastic. It made you feel good!" (Paolo)

**Turning marginality into a positive value:**
"It is a joint task! We are building a cathedral, all together, each with their own knowledge and their own skills. Thanks to this metaphor we can accept things that we generally tend to reject: being distressed, being judged negatively, being asked to make an effort that goes beyond your personal interest and what you would normally accept as an individual… An effort you make not only for yourself, but for the greater good". (Nino)

**Recommendation:**

In order for young people from harsh environments to engage socially it is important that their past experience is recognised and valued. Young people who grew up in a street gang are attracted by risk and danger. Circus and street theatre are examples of activities that can be fruitfully used to attract troubled young people and convey them towards positive social engagement. Policies aimed at providing alternative opportunities for troubled young people should consider the adoption of strategies that do not deny the young people's life experience and identity.

**3. Invest in the peripheries and suburbs**

Our research indicates that the young people who get involved in illegal/criminal activities do so because feel they have no alternative options. Or rather, criminality is the only life they know and the only opportunity for them to engage successfully in some activities and acquire a recognised social role in the local community. The lack of social and leisure opportunities in the neighbourhood, combined with the harsh family and economic situations of many of them, leads the young people to have no views of any alternative life. Many of our young respondents have never had the chance to get out of the neighbourhood until they were teenagers or even later. Many of them recall with great emphasis the first time they could travel to other cities and talk to young people who had a totally different life. Growing up in deprived areas which the young people perceive as "forgotten" by the institutions prevents young people from engaging positively in society and it leads them to perceive illegal activities as the only chance they have in order to find their place in the world. Many of our respondents indicate the opportunity to access the neighbourhood leisure centre as a turning point in their life. The lack of investment in the marginalised suburbs reiterates the stigma of the young people from these areas as 'marginalised' and 'problematic'; our research demonstrates however that they have instead the potential for extraordinary proactive participation *in* society *for* society if they are provided with alternative opportunities. The lack of investment in the marginalised suburbs also favours the spreading of illegal/criminal activities and organizations and prevents young people from engaging positively in society. On the contrary, the

peripheries of large cities can be transformed from places marked by exclusion and insufficiencies to places in which to experiment with new forms of social cohabitation, as our research indicates.

**Examples:**

**Childhood in a deprived periphery:**

"We didn't have anywhere to hang out…we were always making trouble in the neighbourhood. It was dark. There was no cinema. There weren't any football pitches, we'd use fruit crates, one on the left and one on the right, 50 meters apart, and we'd play. It was bad. There were no theatres, no parks…nothing. Bars closed at 7pm.There was a curfew. You couldn't go out. Nothing, nothing at all!" (Cristian)

**Internalised periphery:**

"This condition of internalised marginalisation - of internalised periphery is very strong and clear. They have internalised the inability to get out of their specific context, emerge and change things. A girl recently said to me: "Teach, what do YOU know? I come from the sewers" as if to say, worrying about me is useless, I know more about life than you do because I live amidst gunfire, shit and filth". (Maria)

**Before and after:**

"Before, this was normality for me! But since I've started getting out of Naples with G., away from [my] Region… I've seen other towns in Italy and I've seen the difference between them and us down here. It's astonishing!" (Cristian)

**Never imagined a different life:**

"…Then I went to Padua where I met loads of young people my age who were continuing their studies in higher education. When I came back here all the people my age were doing was stealing and bag snatching!…I had never imagined it was possible to work and study and lead a regular law abiding life. It never dawned on me to live "above board" let's say!" (Michele)

**Investing in the future of the neighbourhood:**

"I'll never leave this neighbourhood. If I do, it'll be because I know that Barra is capable of making it, that the kids will be fine on their own and that a whole new generation will be able to grow up correctly, in the right way, with the right rules, experiencing the beauty of childhood". (Marcello)

**Recommendation:**

Research findings clearly indicate that youth policies should target **peripheries and suburbs** as key-spaces for the growth of young people's creativity and innovation potential. Youth policies should be given more resources to create opportunities (including providing leisure spaces and activities) for young people in the most marginalised suburbs of large cities.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on the findings from an ethnographic research study conducted between June 2017 and February 2018. Fieldwork included in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 young people (6 females and 14 males) aged between 18 and 34 and participant observation of the activities carried out by the youngsters at the Asterix centre as well as on neighbourhood streets and squares. The young interviewees also provided pictures taken by themselves and showing their neighbourhood and the activities they engage in. Most of the young respondents working with 'at risk' young people in the suburbs of Naples were themselves 'at risk' youngsters in the past. Contacts with the young respondents were made through links with two self-organised centres organizing theatre and street circus activities.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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| **FURTHER READING** | Mefalopulos, A., Di Giovanni F. (2018) *Artistic/Creative Start-Ups in the Suburbs of Naples, Italy.* Promise case study http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Artistic-creative-start-ups-in-the-suburbs-of-Naples.pdf<br><br>Iprs (2016). *National context report. Italy.* Promise project |