

National



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: SPAIN (1 OF 2)

Self-building, alternative accommodation and public space uses

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INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society.

In Spain, one of our case-studies focussed on young people who are engaged in self-building, alternative accommodation and new uses of collective spaces of which the public/private character is unclear. This policy brief is concerned with what the young people identify as the main obstacles to lead autonomous lives and how they respond to them. The policy recommendations are directed towards informing political and regulatory changes to support young people's autonomy. The main aim of the recommendations is to increase young people's resources and capabilities to choose their life trajectories.

Many young Spaniards want to participate more actively in providing for their own futures. They often learn skills informally, non-formally or are self-taught and they try to avoid bureaucratic constraints. It is difficult to speculate, at the collective level, on the extent to which these initiatives will be able to question, substitute or coexist with other more traditional options. At the individual level, it is difficult to estimate the most relevant effects of these young people's actions. A key question that remains open is how these participatory, bottom-up, atypical and micro-local initiatives can gain further momentum, can be articulated into sustainable proposals and enter into the central political arenas. However, it is already possible to identify in these distrusting, resistant, critical and alternative behaviours, some elements that can contribute to complementing, replacing or revitalizing the usual practices. These elements have guided our policy recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Facilitate access to autonomous accommodation (residential emancipation from family home)

The two alternative accommodation initiatives contacted, and many of those we have come across in the collected documentation and the relevant literature on the issue, originate from the need to find residential independence - together with political and social motives. Many of our interviewees claimed that they were looking for alternative housing solutions, because they could not afford or did not want to spend half or even more of their available monthly income in paying the rent for a small room in a shared flat.

“Many times I think, if we didn’t have to pay any rent, or had to pay much less rent, how would our lives be? Now we dedicate more than 30% of the salary, almost 50% to pay the rent, eh? It is very much, compared to other countries, right? That is not fair!” HQ2

Our fieldwork in this area found young people demonstrate an active role in facing their housing needs, investing several hours per week in self-building efforts. These commitments are equivalent in many regards to more conventional hours of work or social activism. However, the case study also indicated that these initiatives face the risk of being too isolated in a general institutional context that could do much more to accommodate them, and to develop cross-sectorial policies to increase both the number of these initiatives and their potential positive effects (in satisfying accommodation needs, and in terms of capacity building). The findings point towards the following lines of policy reform:

- Promoting social housing for young people, with self-building playing a key role. Given current levels of social housing in Spain, and elsewhere in Europe, there is room for an increase. In a significant part of these housing programs, young people should not only be passive beneficiaries, but they could be involved in the main stages of the project: designing, building and managing. Thus, these political answers would directly deal with three of the most challenging issues young people face: accommodation, employment and education/training. The final institutional design could explore different mixes of solutions depending on the final users’ socioeconomic characteristics, and on the role of the main actors supporting the young people (public sector, private actors, cooperatives...).
- Redesigning the regulatory framework of house renting to increase trust in alternative forms of rent. Given the stock of empty houses, first and second residences, and specially houses with different reform needs (from light maintenance to structural interventions); there is space for a better use of available accommodation resources.
- We also met a group of 6 young women who decided to relocate to a small village, within a 2-hour drive from Barcelona, to reform a house and start a sustainable agritourist cooperative. They helped us to better understand the growing trend of young people moving to rural villages to escape high accommodation costs in big cities. The impact of these choices is still negligible in comparison with the major urban-rural imbalance dynamics. However, they offer insights to orient policies trying to redress or mitigate these urban-rural territorial imbalances. These policies should better support people in rural areas to retain access to opportunities usually linked to big cities (transport, decentralization of key services, developing high-speed broadband and mobile telephone coverage, distant learning, tele-working...) so that the rural/urban choice is not an all-or-nothing one, and there is more reversibility in several residential choices throughout life. In particular renewed policies in this area would be beneficial for young people choosing to go to rural areas to escape speculative housing market in big cities, and contribute to develop those rural areas.

- At the more general and structural level, the problems young people face in finding affordable accommodation, given its serious consequences for their personal development and for society at large (birth rates under replacement rates), calls for attention to the main structural policies affecting the price formation mechanisms in the housing market. This includes all the usual suspects mentioned when considering why the ratio of house prices to average annual salaries, with recent housing bubbles, has seriously upwardly departed from historical trends: urban and land planning biased in favour of landowners and developers, unclear procedures around giving planning permission for housing, land hoarding, embedded speculative incentives in multi-transaction processes, regressive land tax policies, social housing deficits, asymmetric information. In sum, government and market failures limit the supply and quality of low-cost homes.

2. Support young people's agency in public spaces and collective facilities

We approached two groups of young people's self-building collective facilities (1 educative and 1 cultural space), and one group remodelling a neglected urban area into a lively public space. Whereas the main apparent motive for the first two initiatives was coping with unsatisfied needs around the lack of collective facilities; for the third one, it was looking for opportunities to implement their skills in reforming and revitalizing a neglected plot.

Still, in the three cases, young people departed from a single major reason as a main explanation behind their activities. Instead, they stressed that, together with dealing with specific needs, they were motivated by a mix of concerns: show their capacity and will to do things, meet with other young people to do this together, give political visibility to the shortages they were experiencing and their ways to deal with them.

To suit our policy recommendations to this area, it is helpful to consider the main features and motivations we identified in these groups. They aim at: achieving radical exemplarity of democratic practices in decision-making and the distribution of tasks (transparency in terms of the reasons, knowledge or experiences behind the decisions); keeping important decision-making margins about the main objectives as the initiative goes along; learning and performing new skills; exploring synergies with other related activities; communicate with other groups of young people; explore the limits of legality and expand the repertoire of what is acceptable.

Therefore, to better support young people's involvement in the creation and use of public spaces and collective equipment, a range of political measures could be taken into account:

- Increase the availability of spaces and facilities where young people have a bigger role in designing, building and managing their goals and functioning. In these places, young people have more chances to go beyond the usual practice and to contribute to glimpse new traits of future collective aspirations.
- In existing public facilities for young people, and regarding issues related to space use (schedules, timings, operating hours, and contents of the activities) there could be larger areas that remain unspecified so that young people have a bigger say in the final decisions of how the space is used. The multi-purpose character of the spaces, and iterative decision-making, also help to widen the range of young people participating and their involvement.
- As regards some existing infrastructure such as schools, public libraries, cultural and sport facilities; in many cases, their timetables and opening hours are constrained by the work schedules of their paid employees (many are closed during lunch breaks, evening and night hours, weekends and school holidays). Here, there is margin to increase not only the time availability of the facilities for young people, but to see ways to involve the young people in the managing and monitoring of the facilities when responsible employees are not around, so that the operating hours of the facilities are expanded and decoupled from the employees' shifts.

- Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms by gaining transparency, validity and reliability in the assessment of the final outputs (minimum requirements of a facility, the satisfaction of particular needs) and allow for more openness, innovation and flexibility in the procedures leading to those outputs. This may help to get rid of constraining regulatory details, facilitate permission procedures, and widen what is legally and socially accepted.
- Given the minority and the isolated character of many of these atypical initiatives, the public sector, and, especially in our case study, the local authorities, have a key coordinating and communication supportive role to play. By promoting the communication and coordination of these different young people's initiatives, among themselves and with other young and non-young social actors, authorities may help these activities to become something more than anecdotal or simply an isolated performative exercise. The shorter-or-longer life expectancy of these initiatives, the exchange of knowledge and participants between different actions, the possibility of virtuous relay cycles between different initiatives and groups of young people; all these factors depend on the coordination between several initiatives in supportive institutional contexts. A main factor, thus, for their generalisability and scalability ('out and up') to contribute to relevant political and social change.

3. Promoting alternative forms of economic participation (cooperatives, freelancing, part-time jobs...)

A significant number of young people are interested in producing both personal and social value in different ways to full-time dependent waged employment (their preferences include cooperative efforts, through to a wide range of part-time arrangements, to informal freelancing and self-employment).

Many young people interviewed explicitly avoided full-time employment, because they could not find their preferred jobs or because they wanted a bigger control of their time and of their productive activities:

I'm working right now, I'm working in a bar, 30 hours on weekends. Then, this gives me four whole days to be here (self-building site) during the week and do what I want... In the bar I am 10 hours on Friday, 10 hours on Saturday and 10 hours on Sunday ... in the evening ... I actually asked at the bar to have the most concentrated working time, to have intervals of 4 days off for me... (EC3)

Given the mismatch between young peoples' preferences about how to participate in the Labour Market and the alternatives available, there is room for serious policy reform in the following areas:

- Facilitate access to non-dependent employment: free-lancing, cooperatives, self-employment (remove regulatory obstacles to these forms of work, remove the tax disproportionate penalties some freelance activities suffer, see possible changes in social protection rules to better accommodate these economic activities)
- Support substantial forms of part-time (>20 hour per week), with pro-rata treatment in working conditions to avoid discrimination between full-timers and part-timers in income per hour for the same work, or social protection. The public sector, as employer, may pioneer the effort in offering jobs of 24-hours per week to young people (depending on the activities and young people's preferences, different forms of part-time jobs might be more or less convenient: 3-day working weeks, 5-hour working days, intensive seasonal jobs made of 4-5 months with long working weeks...)

- Avoid segmentation in the labour market between insiders (usually adults) and outsiders (where young people, together with women and migrants, are overrepresented) and refine productivity assessments that support equal pay for equal work regardless of the type of contract or the employees' demographic attributes (gender, age, national origin...).

4. Better synchronisation between the activities young people do, or want to do, and the acquisition of the knowledge and skills they need to perform them.

Most young people interviewed criticised the education they had followed, or they had access to, as too disconnected from the activities they were carrying out, or wanted to execute in the future. According to many of them, the nature of the curricula they had learned usually had few links with what they find themselves actually doing or they wanted to do. Additionally, the time gaps between the learning stages and when they put into practice what they have learnt, are also too stretched apart.

'we spent the five years of our career without visiting a building site' (V3)

'you finish your studies and you see yourself beginning from scratch again' (V2)

By contrast, the initiatives studied in the case-study showed close links between the activities young people were involved in and the skills and knowledge they were learning. Moreover, within the same month, they had the chance to put into practice what they had been learning.

Following their assessment of what they had missed in their own formal education and what they specially valued in the self-building activities they were carrying out we think the next policy lines are worth exploring:

- Assess the suitability of traditional sequential patterns of education-employment transitions. For a large number of young people, there might be better solutions than following, first, an education program for several years, and, then, after 4, 5 or more years of full-time formal education, trying to find a job putting into practice the knowledge and skills acquired. Many seem to prefer alternative routes where learning and practical working are more simultaneous - combined within the same time unit (month, week, even days). They are looking for more solutions with elements including 'learning by doing' and 'on-the-job-training'. In the words of one of them, 'I would like to spend some days of the week studying, and other days performing what I have learnt'
- At the same time, a more 'learning by doing' approach often needs contexts that support project-oriented, team work, and detailed outputs as core ingredients.
- Together with wanting more flexibility, many show concerns about how to ensure security or predictability in their education-to-employment transitions. A greater level of security, after any educational effort, is afforded to young people who have opportunities to put their learned knowledge into paid/unpaid practice.
- Given that many of the young people we met, had learnt a wide range of self-building skills via informal/non-formal methods (peer exchanges and self-learning), their situation stresses the need to develop systems of validation and accreditation of informal and non-formal learning, including reliable systems of competence evaluation.
- Many young people lead diverse education and working life trajectories, combining different experiences (formal and informal learning, paid and unpaid work, and in different countries and regulatory contexts). Consequently, they would benefit from more developed recognition systems that better accommodate the different nature of these activities, to better support the cumulative transferability of the skills gained in the different working, learning, and social contexts.

5. Policies affecting young people's wellbeing may benefit from deepening their cross-sectorial nature and shifting in several areas from sequential to simultaneous/grid logics.

The young people we interviewed face challenges that, allowing for a huge variety of circumstances and contexts, are replicated among young people across Europe: unsatisfactory education, precarious employment, difficult access to accommodation, low income levels, and little political influence. They experience troubles in all the key steps in the traditional transition from childhood to adulthood; and many experience several of them at the same time. The old advice, first get an education, then a job, find a house, form a family, make a career and, maybe then, have something to say, now seems more questionable than ever.

All the initiatives considered in this case study (self-building linked to alternative forms of accommodation and collective facilities), included young people having a proactive approach to several basic needs: learning new skills, performing them to get access to affordable accommodation, doing them within groups of friends where they develop strong affective bonds, and, often, investing their activities with political meaning. Besides, and opposed to more conventional sequential perspectives, they try to pursue all these goals simultaneously within the same time units (weeks, months...), trying to benefit from the synergies and interactions between these activities.

- Recommendations: favouring a more cross-sectorial and simultaneous/grid policy approach could be considered in several key areas for young people wellbeing, see for example, the social housing programs for young people where self-building is at the core of the strategy. Young people would be both the main beneficiaries (perhaps with others), and the main actors in the designing, building and managing of the project. Such a project may include educational/training sessions, paid/unpaid work, access to residential independence, and, if necessary, access to soft-conditional income support measures or even unconditional basic income.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on: 23 semi-structured in-depth interviews with young people as part of a participatory research strategy; several days of participant observation; numerous informal conversations, both during the days of participant observation and in other meetings; written, audio-visual and photographic material of the different activities; and the collection of various documentary sources, such as websites, internal documents and media articles.

Table 1. Interviews and Participant observation

	Interviews	Participant observation (days)
Self-building 1	6	4
Self-building 2	4	6
Masovería Urban Gardens	7	4
Alternative Architecture	3	3
Alternative Accommodation	3	3

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING	http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Self-building-alternative-accommodation-and-public-space-uses.pdf