

**Localise workshop**  
**“Integrated employment and activation policies in a multilevel welfare system”**  
**Milan, August 30-31 2012**

***Experiencing precariousness in European cities:  
the young between risks and opportunities in times of crisis.***

**by**  
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*First draft, please do not quote*  
*English not revised*

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## 1. Introduction

Work is on a path of deep change: it is less and less related to the production of a good, and more to a service relation, while its impact on private life has become more insidious, because of the growing precariousness of job contracts. One of the most evident consequences is the loss of boundaries between unemployment and employment and the rise of discontinuity as a distinctive feature in the biographies of young people (Zucchetti 2005). In fact, if the core workforce is still relatively protected against the fluctuations of the market, young people are more likely to be offered and to accept precarious jobs that guarantee less protection and often also lower wages (Baranowska, Gebel 2010).

The financial crisis begun in 2008 has worsened the conditions of the most fragile young, as the low skilled ones, since the young are more exposed to business cycles than older workers. In many countries the highest rate of unemployment is found among young people: about 50% in Greece and Spain, over 30 in Bulgaria, Italy, Portugal and Slovakia, with a European average of 22%. The impact of the crisis on youth unemployment rates is, however, mediated by national economic performance, labour market structural characteristics, policies and regulation (Dietrich 2012).

In order to address the consequences of job precariousness on social vulnerability in a comparative perspective, this paper focuses on a group especially exposed to the risk of precariousness and long-term unemployment: the young with a low education profile. The paper presents the preliminary results of the analysis of 120 interviews with young at risk of unemployment, aged between 18 and 33 years, with a low educational level (maximum ISCED 3 and not studying at university), carried out in 20 cities in 10 European countries in the frame of a wider European project, WILCO<sup>1</sup>.

Coherently with the existing literature on the subject (Ranci 2010), empirical findings based on our interviews show that more than the traditional concept of unemployment, defined as the absence of work as it was common in the industrial societies (Pugliese 1993), the young are stuck in a complex “grey zone” including fixed term contracts, occasional jobs, part-time occupations, internships, training and education initiatives. Transiting from unemployment to employment is not a sharp step anymore, the young pass through a wide range of situations, and their participation to the labour market differs from case to case (Zucchetti 2005), thus reconfiguring the “old” risk of being totally excluded from the labour market into the “new” risk of being temporarily, unstably and thus loosely integrated (Ranci 2010).

The paper is organized in six paragraphs, including this introduction. In paragraph 2 we present recent data about labour market participation of the young in European countries. In paragraph 3 we briefly introduce local policies aimed at labour market (re)integration in our 20 cities. In paragraph 4 we identify and analyse five different profiles of young people facing unemployment, on the basis of their biographical trajectories. In paragraph 5 we discuss the size and composition of the resource packages that the young at risk of unemployment can rely upon. Paragraph 6 draws some conclusions, and introduces the impact of precariousness on the general living conditions of the young, and their overall strategies to improve them.

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<sup>1</sup> The WILCO project ([www.wilcoproject.eu](http://www.wilcoproject.eu)) aims at studying social innovations in favour of cohesion in the local welfare systems, with a focus on the conditions for their continuity and transferability. Activation, early childcare and housing policies are its main areas of interest. 20 cities in 10 countries are analysed: Zagreb and Varaždin (Croatia), Lille and Nantes (France), Münster and Berlin (Germany), Amsterdam and Nijmegen (the Netherlands), Milan and Brescia (Italy), Warsaw and Plock (Poland), Barcelona and Pamplona (Spain), Malmo and Stockholm (Sweden), Bern and Geneva (Switzerland), Medway and Birmingham (UK). We owe many thanks to all WILCO teams that carried out interviews with target groups and drafted city reports.

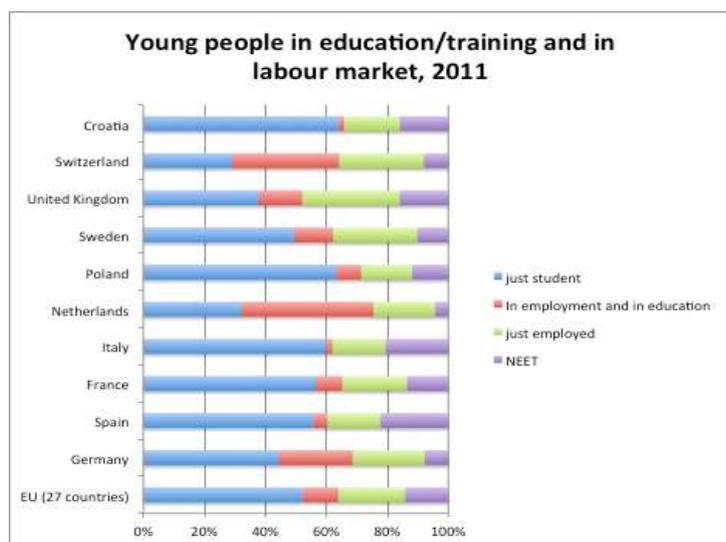
## 2. Young at risk of unemployment<sup>2</sup>

Being young is the delicate condition that occurs in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Culturally mediated, its duration has deeply changed in time, and may vary across contexts, since it is related to the achievement of full independence from the family of origin. It is highly debated in literature when the condition of adulthood starts, as it is the result of a complex interaction of factors: psychological, institutional (that manage the transition from school to work) and structural (as social class, gender, ethnicity and locality) (Bynner 2005).

It is, nevertheless, quite assessed that this process is lasting longer than in the past, up to and over 30 years of age (especially in the Southern European countries), also due to a longer transition into working life, especially for low skilled people. In fact, labour market integration is fundamental to reach the economic independence, which allows the young to make long-term decisions and commitments usually associated to adult life (developing a worldview, an occupation and conjugal relationships) (Côté, Bynner 2008). However, being economically independent is not a sufficient condition to push young people to leave their family of origin. Having a partner might be resolving in leaving home; in turn, some form of economic support (such as parental help or welfare benefits) might help the young to establish their own household even in a condition of precarious integration in the labour market (Jacob, Kleinert 2007).

Data about the position of the young on the labour market must be taken carefully, since most of them are still mainly or solely involved in education. Only in some countries, like Germany and the Netherlands, it is quite diffused that a student is also involved in the labour market. This may be partly explained by the dual educational system and policy measures such as the “Qualifications and connections” programme, the “Occupational Orientation Programme” and the incentives to entrepreneurs who hire apprentices in Germany, or by programmes such as “Drive to reduce dropout rates”, “learn-work jobs”, or ‘XXL Jobs’ with workers close to retirement transferring skills to young trainees in the Netherlands (European Foundation 2012). On the contrary, in Southern Europe, where measures to support school-to-work transition are particularly weak, less than one young every four is active in the labour market.

Table 1 – Young people in education/training and in the labour market, 15-24 years old 2011. Source: Eurostat, EU 27.

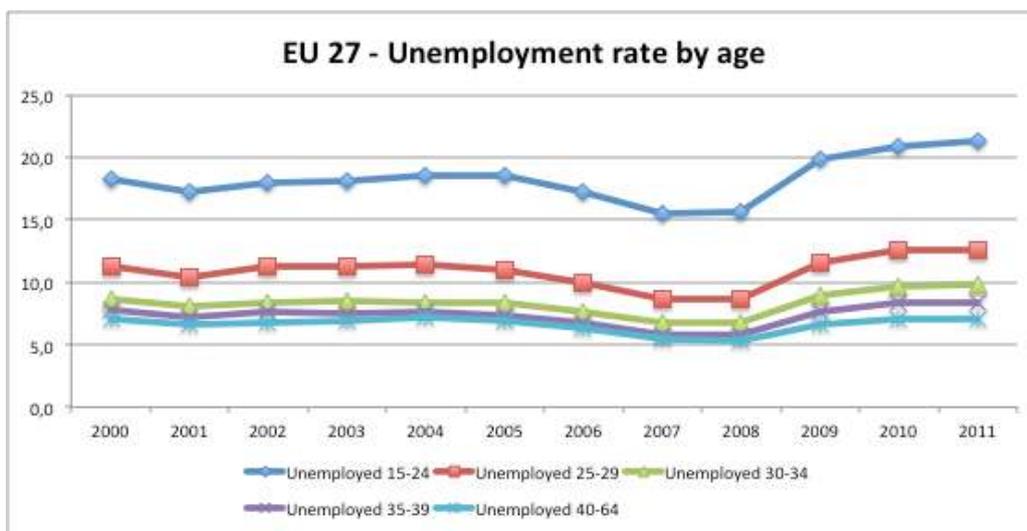


<sup>2</sup> All data in tables will refer to WILCO countries, since the interviews that will be later analysed were carried out in those countries. The main source of information is Eurostat Labour Force Survey and Eurostat Statistics database.

The effect of the crisis has been particularly sharp in almost all the European countries on those young that were active on the labour market before it started. In fact, not only young people between 19 and 24 are more likely to be unemployed than the rest of the population, but their vulnerability is higher since the beginning of the crisis in 2008. They have been losing their job more frequently than other categories and there are about 6% more young unemployed in 2011 compared to 2007, while other age groups suffered less from the crisis (+3,9% for the 25-29 age range, +1,6% for the 40-64). Young people have also reduced their employment rates, with the exception of Germany, Poland and Switzerland where employment rates increased even among the 15-24 year olds. In most countries, however, the highest percent increment has been in the number of young people who are neither involved in education/training nor in employment, even if in Spain, the Netherlands, Croatia and UK another side effect of the crisis was the increased participation to education.

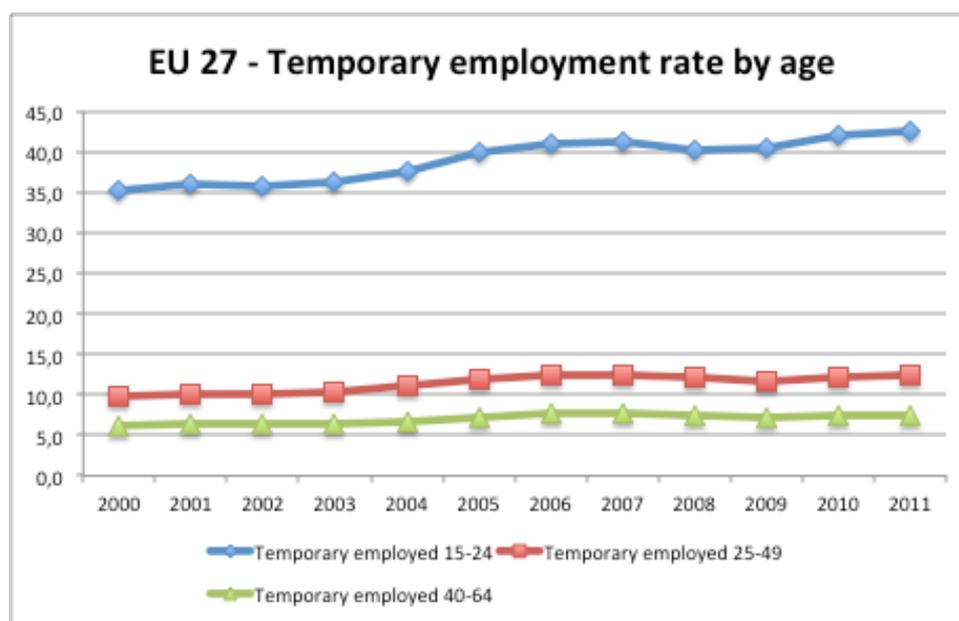
In almost all WILCO countries the young experience periods of unemployment which are sensibly shorter than older workers. Yet, in some countries (Italy, Spain, Poland and Croatia) unemployment is not a transitory condition even for the youngest, albeit it is worse for older workers. One further side effect of the crisis was an increase in the average duration of unemployment, also for the young (Dietrich 2012).

Table 2 – Unemployment rate by age, 2000 – 2011. Source: Eurostat, EU 27.



However, the young are not simply facing the risk of unemployment, they are also exposed to poor quality employment that results in a long-term impact on earnings and status, especially in the case of low skilled workers. The diffusion of temporary and part-time jobs among them is – as expected – higher than in the rest of the population. Especially in some countries like Italy and Spain, the crisis forced young unemployed to accept involuntary part-time, exposing them at the risk of being underemployed or – worse – working poor.

Table 3 – Temporary employment rate by age, 2000 – 2011. Source: Eurostat, EU 27.



As it might be expected, the risk of being unemployed or unstably integrated in the labour market is also influenced by social characteristics, especially ethnicity and gender, but also by the structural opportunities of the local systems of production (Isengard 2003; Escott 2012; Dietrich 2012). Being a migrant in general and in particular being a young migrant increases the risk of unemployment in almost all the WILCO countries, with the only exception of Italy and UK. Migrants usually have lower language skills and difficulties to have their educational qualifications recognised outside their country of origin. Partially, such a gap can be also interpreted as a signal of discrimination in the labour market (Isengard 2003). As a result, migrants are usually more unemployed than natives, even among older age groups. The crisis increased the gap between natives and those with a migrant background, measured at EU 27 (Dietrich 2012).

More complicated is the analysis of gender gap. In fact, if for the age group 15-24 women are less unemployed than men, the direction of the relation changes for women in the most fertile years (25-39), when they may have their own family and children. The gender gap has been conditioned by the recent crisis: in fact, before the crisis the unemployment rate of young females was significantly higher than males. This relation has changed with the crisis, which we might suppose to have influenced more sectors – like manufacturing or construction – where traditionally men are more concentrated (Dietrich 2012), whereas women are more employable than men in the service sectors. Thus, local productive systems that still retain an industrial core, like in Italy, France or Poland, offer less jobs for women. On the contrary, countries like the UK, which have experienced in the past a stronger decline of heavy industry and manufacturing, favour more the employability of women (Isengard 2003), although in the context of a strong occupational segregation (Escott 2012).

Locality is more important to low skilled workers, as long as their lack of education and employability reduces their attractiveness on a national or even international labour market, thus making them more sensitive to the opportunities offered within their area of residence (ibid.). Taking in consideration the role of local productive systems within WILCO countries, the situation of young unemployed varies a lot. This is due not only to the structural characteristics that influence their opportunities, but also to the dimension of the urban areas and the role of the welfare systems, both national and local.

As we can see from table 4, Berlin and Birmingham have more unemployment at the local level compared to the national average, while Milan/Brescia, Pamplona/Barcelona, Münster and Warsaw have better situations compared to the rest of their country. However, if we take a deeper look at the transformation between 2005 and 2009, we notice the worst increases in youth unemployment happened in Barcelona (+22%), Pamplona (+16,1%) and Medway (+15,9%). Birmingham and Milan show a lower increase (+10,6% and +7,6%). The evolution of youth unemployment in Barcelona, Pamplona and Medway might be closely related to the burst of the real estate bubble and the crisis in construction, particularly important in the previous period. Polish, German and Dutch cities seem not to have suffered from the financial crisis; rather they saw their young unemployment rate reduced, even more than at the national level.

Table 4 – Unemployment rate 15-24 years old, NUTS 3 and Country, 2005 and 2009. Source: Eurostat.

	2005		2009		Diff. 2009/2005	
	NUTS 3	Country	NUTS 3	Country	NUTS 3	Country
<b>EU 27</b>	18,6		19,9			1,30
<b>Berlin</b>	23,7	15,5	17,5	11,2	-6,20	-4,30
<b>Münster</b>	10,7	15,5	:	11,2		-4,30
<b>Pamplona</b>	14,8	19,7	30,9	37,8	16,10	18,10
<b>Barcellona</b>	16,1	19,7	38,1	37,8	22,00	18,10
<b>Lille</b>	:	20,6	:	23,2		2,60
<b>Nantes</b>	:	20,6	:	23,2		2,60
<b>Milano</b>	15,6	24,0	23,2	25,4	7,60	1,40
<b>Brescia</b>	10,2	24,0	14,2	25,4	4,00	1,40
<b>Nijmegen</b>	10,0	8,2	5,8	6,6	-4,20	-1,60
<b>Amsterdam</b>	10,4	8,2	7,3	6,6	-3,10	-1,60
<b>Plock</b>	37,6	36,9	21,4	20,6	-16,20	-16,30
<b>Warsaw</b>	23,8	36,9	11,6	20,6	-12,20	-16,30
<b>Stockholms</b>	21,6	22,8	22,1	25,0	0,50	2,20
<b>Malmo</b>	22,6	22,8	24,8	25,0	2,20	2,20
<b>Birmingham</b>	20,4	12,8	31,0	19,1	10,60	6,30
<b>Medway</b>	13,5	12,8	29,4	19,1	15,90	6,30
<b>Genève</b>	:	8,8	:	8,5		-0,3
<b>Bern</b>	:	8,8	:	8,5		-0,3
<b>Zagreb</b>	:	32,3	:	25,1		-7,2
<b>Varazdin</b>	:	32,3	:	25,1		-7,2

In conclusion, we might suppose that structural inequalities (age, gender and migrant background) are still playing a role in structuring the opportunities for young people who want to enter the labour market, together with the low educational level. The conceptual lenses guiding our analysis – social vulnerability – does not identify a simple condition of material deprivation or poverty, but a situation of instability in a context of harsh constraints (Ranci 2010). Vulnerable people are at risk because of an instable position in one of the main systems of social integration: family, welfare or – as in the case of our interviewees – labour market. Such position might be worse in case of women or migrants, who are less likely to be employed, and might vary by locality, since the structure of opportunities/constraints also depends on the features of local welfare provisions and of local production system.

### 3. Local employment policies between activating and rescaling reforms

European cities are more and more confronted with the social consequences of the ongoing socio-economic changes, and also increasingly assigned responsibilities about welfare policies tackling such consequences (due to both implicit and explicit waves of rescaling; Kazepov 2008). Activating programmes and employment services are particularly sensitive to decentralization of competencies, since their nature of personal services, their emphasis on tailor-made solutions and their link to local labour markets call for localization of both implementation and design of social policies (Sabatinelli 2010). In parallel, cities are challenged by decreasing available resources, also due to the current financial crisis. In fact, decentralization processes often result in reduced overall expenditure, if the shift of responsibilities is not coupled with adequate transfers of resources, or levy powers.

All the twenty cities included in the WILCO project do have some kind of municipal activating programmes or even structured employment services. It is not the scope of this paragraph to describe the rich variety of local schemes and projects, but rather to look comparatively at the overall set of interventions observed in each city and situate it in the framework of the contributions of the other scales of government.

Stemming from existing classifications of welfare, unemployment and rescaling regimes (Esping-Andersen 1999; Gallie, Paugam 2001; Kazepov 2008), we divided our cities into five welfare models: *universalistic*, with a comprehensive protection, early development of activating programmes and centrally steered local autonomy (Malmö and Stockholm in Sweden; Amsterdam and Nijmegen in the Netherlands); *liberal*, with a rather market-oriented policy approach, delayed development of activating measures and increasing territorial differences (Birmingham and Medway in the UK; Bern and Genève in Switzerland); *continental employment-centred*, with fragmented category-based protection, extensive but patchy development of active schemes and diversified rescaling regimes (Lille and Nantes in France; Münster and Berlin in Germany); *Southern European*, with weak and fragmented protection, late and incomplete introduction of activating schemes, sharp territorial differences (Milan and Brescia in Italy; Barcelona and Pamplona in Spain) and *Eastern European*, sharing the transition from planned to market economy, with however diverging developments (Zagreb and Varaždin in Croatia; Warsaw and Plock in Poland)<sup>3</sup>.

As a second step, we distinguished cities with an embryonic development of local employment programmes, cities that compensate with their local programmes for the lacks of national and/or regional policies and regulations, and cities with an articulated set of local policies, combined with adequate contributions of the other scales of government.

A few among our 20 cities show a more embryonic degree of development of local employment services. This is particularly the case of Croatian cities, since in the Eastern, formerly socialist country competencies not only about passive protection, but also about active measures, remain centralised at the national scale, and provision is implemented almost entirely through local branches of state bodies (ministries). Only the largest cities show a wider range of own interventions. In Zagreb additional funds to support the employment of vulnerable groups (e.g. disabled) is paid, support to craftsmen and small firms is given in order to avoid dismissals during the current crisis, extra benefits for unemployed are provided (e.g. subsidized public transportation), and also support to self-employment and programmes for young (under30) unemployed. The technical and financial assistance in view of the future entry in the EU aims at the modernization and decentralization of employment services (Bezovan et al 2011), a process observed also in Poland during the EU integration process.

Yet, the weak degree of development of municipal employment services can be due to completely different reasons. In Pamplona, in the framework of a regionalised country, full employment was registered until the

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<sup>3</sup> Although some hybrid and complex cases (e.g. the Dutch and Swiss ones) would need more careful classification.

current crisis began. Unemployment was frictional and concerned mainly marginal groups, so that local policies used to be residual and addressed only to socially excluded cases. Local labour market (re)integration measures are currently being reorganized in the light of completely altered socio-economic conditions (Aguilar 2011).

In another group of cities, municipal initiatives seem to aim at compensating for the gaps existing in the multilevel governance system of interventions. This is particularly true in the two Italian cities, Milan and Brescia. The national background here is a comparatively delayed modernization and decentralization of employment services, the lack of reforms towards a more universalistic and inclusive passive protection, and the prevalence of short-term, emergency-based and categorical interventions, resulting in persistent overlaps and holes in coverage, and territorial differences. In the Lombardy Region, where both Italian cities are located, a strong quasi-market approach is observed also in employment services, through the use of individual vouchers as almost exclusive financing mechanism, coupled with a growing emphasis (although more rhetoric than effective) on activation (Sabatinelli, Villa 2011). In this framework, Milan and Brescia have developed in the last decades their own municipal employment services, building on their specialized services for the employability of disabled or marginal persons. The degree of development and size of the Milan employment centre (*CELAV*), are more important, as well as its capacity to apply for available regional, provincial or European resources. Despite the differences in dimension and timing, though, services in both cities seem to deal in a similar way with the weakest applicants, as opposed to (provincial) PES (Costa, Sabatinelli 2012).

A larger group of cities presents an articulated range of local labour market (re)integration programmes, that are nevertheless embedded in a rich inter-scalar backdrop in which each institutional level contributes in a coherent MLG system. This is the case of Nordic and Continental cities, and of the two British cities. Dutch cities, for instance, in the framework of regional programmes and financing, directly create jobs via *Breed*, (non-profit) companies co-created by municipalities. Recent and unique of Nijmegen city are 'work corporations': financially independent companies, where social assistance recipients can get work experience while being guided and, if needed, get additional training or complete schooling simultaneously (Brandsen et al 2011, 2012).

Supra-municipal governments – where they exist – play a major role. *Nantes Metropolis* developed numerous services and tools proposed by national labour market policies in the last decade, particularly the *Maison de l'emploi*, created in 2005 with a public-private multi-stakeholder governance approach. The Local Employment and Integration Plan that defines access to transitional jobs and vocational training is now run at the metropolitan level here (Fraise, Bia Zafinikamia 2012).

Cities may also be obliged to take more responsibility in the field because of changes in the division of responsibilities among scales. In Switzerland, for instance, a recent trend is observed towards the "cantonalization" of employment (re)integration measures. At the same time, though, in 2010 the Confederation proposed to cut the duration of the unemployment allowance. Swiss cities have highly criticized this reform, that implied additional expenditures for them, since applicants to municipal programmes would surely increase as a consequence. This is less of a problem in Bern, since here the costs of programmes are shared between the Canton and the cities (Cattacin, Naegeli 2012)

The German city of Münster is an interesting rescaling case, since it has applied to become in 2012 *Optionskommune* (an option foreseen with the Hartz reforms): the local level will be responsible for the arrangements of local labour market policy and the use of federal money. The aim is to develop more city-specific programmes, improve the governance among public, private and non-profit actors, as well as the coordination of employment, social, educational and childcare policies (Zimmer et al 2011).

Barcelona seems to stand out from the group of the Southern European cities for a richer range of local employment interventions. *Barcelona Activa*, created in 1986 as a business incubator, gradually became a local and even international reference in the field. Currently, it carries out programmes for entrepreneurs' support, innovation, employment creation, labour market orientation, vocational and tailor-made training and work experience programmes. Recently (in 2008) the Barcelona Council launched through it an agreement with the regional government, business representatives and trade unions for *Quality Employment* at the local level (Montagut 2012).

Nevertheless, interviews with local actors reveal that in all WILCO cities valuable local activation initiatives are jeopardised by the current economic crisis, that imposes municipalities to cut expenditure.

#### **4. From unemployment to precariousness: five different profiles of young at risk**

As expected, most of our interviews show that the condition of the young can really not be conceived as a standard unemployment condition, but consists rather of a grey state of weak integration in the labour market. Their working biographies are discontinuous and precarious, their stories are made up of episodes of unemployment which are followed by occasional jobs, temporary contracts, failed efforts of starting apprenticeships experiences or university. Quite often unemployment is just the result of the expiration of a temporary contract. In a situation that already appeared as disadvantaged for young people in general, and even critical for some categories, as first or second generation migrants (as emerged in Berlin, Bern, Malmö, Stockholm Amsterdam and Münster) or women (as in Brescia and Milan), the current economic crisis is perceived as a catalyst worsening the conditions of the most fragile profiles.

Education is still considered the key factor for accessing permanently the labour market, even if not all the interviewees are aware that their unstable condition might be caused by their weak professional profile. Having a higher educational level or a specialised qualification eases the transition into the labour market and reduces the risk of unemployment (Isengard 2003). This is not the case for quite many of our interviewees, as a result of two processes. The most fragile cases dropped out from school before achieving a full professional profile, which makes it quite difficult for them to access qualified jobs. Others do have a professional qualification, that is nevertheless inadequate for the labour market demands, either because school did not really prepare them practically for the desired jobs, or because the segment of market in which they would like to work is narrow or in crisis.

However, low education is not the only cause by which they cannot enter labour market. Albeit conditioned by the degree of their motivation and the presence or not of a coherent professional project, their instable labour market integration seems influenced by a sum of weaknesses, including fragile familial contexts and a chain of frail biographical steps, and by the frame of opportunities/constraints offered by the local welfare system, thus confirming that vulnerability is multidimensional and multi-layered (Ranci 2010).

Among our 120 interviewees, we identified five different profiles based on a complex combination of individual elements defining their – anyway weak, but differentiated – position on the labour market. Such profiles are not differentiated by ascribed characteristic, such as gender, migrant background or the country they live in, but they are rather defined by their biographical trajectories of integration into the labour market, focusing particularly on the transition(s) between work and non work (Murgia 2010), and the presence/absence of a professional project that might orient their occupational choices.

#### 4.1. Young and fragile

A first group of interviewees has just exited the educational system, in some cases achieving a basic professional qualification but more often just dropping out of it without a real training. Their career as students has often been unstable and fragmented, since they had not a clear idea of what they would do in their occupational life yet. They are still quite young (under 20 on average) and their work experiences have been mostly temporary or protected by special welfare programs for youth activation. Quite often, they have been occupied as seasonal workers in retail, personal services or tourism, sometimes even unregulated. In many cases their profile is particularly fragile, not only for the double instability they have experienced both in the educational system and on the labour market, but also because they come from unstable and problematic families .

During their unemployment, they wait for the right occasion that might lead to a more stable labour market integration, in some cases just passively waiting for someone to propose them “something to do”. Their desire is to find an apprenticeship, which would possibly allow them to gain a professional experience more solid than their education. Especially if they have a migrant background, the role of the social services in activating their agency is determinant.

*“I was doubting a little, whether I should continue studying or not, so I didn't do anything for 2 or 3 months, just thinking if I was going to go back to school or look for a job. And then I decided to get a job because I wanted to earn money, help my parents and stuff, and then I started looking for a job” (M-25).*

The most insidious risk derives from their passivity, which might lead them to a NEET condition if they are not adequately supported by their family or by services. In fact, the lack of motivation and orientation might jeopardize the formulation of a medium or long-term professional project, and push them towards a situation of exclusion from both the labour market and the educational system.

#### 4.2. Flexible with a professional project

Respondents in this group are just slightly older than the previous ones (around 24 years old on average) but, differently from them, they have matured a rather specific professional project they try to pursue. Their projects often focus on creative or artistic fields: filmmaking, dancing, writing. These people are not simply accepting the first job offer that might arrive, but they are trying to build a definite occupational profile coherent with their specialization objective. Their agency is strategic, as they alternate job experiences with training to build a set of competencies useful in their field of interest. Quite often they are favoured in their strategy by the fact of still being young enough to access starter contracts favourable for employers, thus being competitive also with respect to older workers even if they lack experience.

The most serious risk they face is the failure of their professional project. Despite their motivation, this may occur not only due to business cycles and competition (quite hard especially in the most creative sectors, like movie-making or radio entertainment), but also because the educational system seldom offers a good link between theory and practice.

*“I'm precarious as a life-style. Probably, it is due to the fact that in Italy there aren't many opportunities for young people. You have the chance to learn a job at school, but it's hard to do it in practice afterwards. Many young persons have good ideas in creative sectors, but it's hard to establish a real career, particularly in my field [film-making]” (M-28).*

Many of them are currently involved in new educational projects in order to improve their chances of being hired in better positions. Yet, training often has a cost that the young unemployed cannot meet without support. Some have a temporary, instrumental labour market involvement, just aimed to pay basic needs while studying for further education achievements.

Young people in this group are ready to face unemployment periods, as long as these are functional to obtain an apprenticeship in their field of interest, or better job offers. To play such strategy, the role of family or social support is fundamental. Nevertheless, their coherence is rewarded by the fact that they are able to catch longer job contracts (17 months on average).

#### *4.3. Precarious with fragmented paths*

A large group of interviewees have not really developed a professional project, they are simply browsing the labour market to catch the best job offer they can find in the short term. They have been able to work more or less continuously in the past years, but they are facing the most insidious risks of precariousness. In fact, as they get older their CVs are getting more and more fragmented and they have neither been able to build a coherent professional profile, nor to achieve a job that offers them a more stable integration into the labour market.

Even if they experience the shortest unemployment spells among our interviewees (less than 6 months on average), these are often followed by very short contracts of few weeks or even days. Their philosophy is just to accept the first job offer they get in order to pay their basic needs. As a result they are trapped in a grey condition of unstable labour market integration, which may get worse as years pass by, since their eclecticism does not allow them to accumulate a critical mass of professional experience so to be competitive in a sector or profession.

*"If I have to make a CV now, I think I can fill up 3 pages at least... My parents always told me: 'make sure you have an income'... so at some point I was just too easy in accepting anything that I was offered.... I have not been critical enough in choosing something I really liked, I just had to have an income... I don't think I can count the number of jobs I had on one hand.... Maybe 15 different employers? And whether that helped me in my career? Well, if I look at where I was when I was 18 and where I am now, then no" (M-30).*

This extreme short-term puts in question the capacity of planning of young people, both in terms of leaving their family of origin and establishing a new household, but also in terms of building a successful career. In Southern European cities (Pamplona and Barcelona, Milan and Brescia), the deregulation of temporary contracts implemented at the national level in the past decades has boosted the diffusion of these highly precarious profiles, increasing the vulnerability of the young workers since there is no law barrier against social dumping. Our interviewees often report being obliged to accept jobs that were clearly underpaid.

#### *4.4. Marginal and weak*

These respondents are confronted to the most difficult paths of labour market integration, particularly at risk for different reasons, not all related to their employability. In most cases, these young people have been long-term unemployed (over 18 months on average since their last contract), with scarce or very precarious experience on the labour market and low educational profiles, quite often particularly fragmented.

In some cases, the suggestion of their PES tutors is to use these months in order to get trained or re-trained, so to be better equipped and more competitive once the economy starts to recover; a suggestion that is not always accepted. Quite often in the past they have failed educational objectives, changed or dropped specialization or training, without achieving a clear idea of what they want to do in the future yet. Quite often the result is exclusion both from education or training and labour market.

*“I started technical secondary school to see if I was interested in economics; after half a year I cancelled this and started an educational training. I finished in 2008. Then I started sending applications, but I just received refusals. I wanted to work in the social field and started some measures, so I worked at the Familienzentrum in 2008 for six months. When the contract expired I could have extended it, but I needed some holidays. Later I regretted I had not extend that contract” (M-24).*

At stake is not simply their lacking agency or the failure of the implemented measures. In the majority of cases, these young have gone through difficult situations in their past: they come from families at risks (e.g. experiencing parents’ hard separation, illness, death or imprisonment), they had difficult migration trajectories, or they had problems with justice (e.g. for drugs or street traffics). Harsh political and social events have also marked some of our interviewees’ biographies (e.g. the war in Croatia). In some cases, disabilities and diseases made their integration in the labour market more difficult than the one of their peers; in others they have to sustain care responsibilities. Both situations diminish their possibility to be employed full-time. For young women, an early pregnancy might become an obstacle to labour market integration, especially in case of weak professional profiles or after a separation.

Quite often, these young are totally cared for by the social services (see § 5.3), that offers them protected labour market experiences, but also income and housing support. However, the quality of these initiatives depends on the generosity of the national and local welfare systems, and thus varies a lot among our cities.

#### 4.5. Interrupted careers

The last profile is more typical of our oldest interviewees (27 and over). What is common about them is to have experienced in the past a good and stable labour market integration, with contracts lasting 24 months and more, currently followed by a long unemployment period (20 months and more). The reasons why after their last contract they were not able to find another job are quite gendered.

In women’s opinion, their incapacity of finding a job is correlated to maternity. In fact, being now in their 30s, they are quite likely either to have young children, and/or to have a baby in the subsequent years. Quite often, the previous contract has been interrupted, or not renewed because of a pregnancy. For men, the exit from labour market is more correlated to business cycle: quite often interviewees blame the financial crisis for their situation, as long as neither their motivation, nor their experience, nor activation measures seem enough to find a job.

For both males and females, the reduced employability might also depend on age: growing older means they cannot benefit anymore of starters’ contracts incentives. In other cases the temporary contract they had was not renewed since public regulation imposed – after a certain number of extensions – to transform it into a permanent one, what their previous employer did not want to do.

*“I’ve been a hairdresser for 11 years but now I’m unemployed since about 2 years. I didn’t want to change job, it’s just that I didn’t find a job anymore, also because*

*I'm out of the age for apprenticeship contracts. This is a real limit for me and that's one of the reasons why I'm doing other courses to try and change job" (F-31).*

Their unemployment condition persists even if they are quite active in searching a new job or in trying to adjust their competencies with training courses in new fields.

## **5. Resource packages**

One of our research objectives was to explore what resources the young precarious can count on in order to cope with their condition of instability and build up their own welfare. We investigated their access to resources in five domains: income support; training, employment and activation services; housing solutions; information; emotional support. Such resources vary in generosity, continuity and their actual impact on individual welfare. However, it is not only the quantity of resources the young have access to that counts, but also the coverage of different domains and the balance among the contributions from different "pillars".

Drawing on the classic Polanyi's spheres of socio-economic integration (1978), we have considered four pillars: public welfare; market; family and primary network; solidarity networks<sup>4</sup>. Relying mainly or only on one of the pillars entails a risk of remaining completely exposed to contingencies, in case that pillar should for some reason fail. As expected, given our selection criteria, our interviewees have generally little attachment to the market. Currently unemployed, they are either involved in activation programmes or protected jobs, or work discontinuously, just for a few hours a week, without a contract or even illegally. They have little means to purchase employment, training or information services on the market. Their connection to the market mainly consists of the initiatives they autonomously undertake to look for a job: checking vacancies, sending CVs, visiting firms or employment agencies, pursuing self-employment, etc. More diversified, as we shall see, is the relevance of public and family resources.

Combining the number and type of resources respondents declared they can rely on, distinguishing the source these stem from and assessing their continuity, generosity and impact, we identified five different "resources packages": two of them are rather balanced; a third relies mainly on public welfare; a fourth is family-based; and a fifth is based on a scant set of resources.

### *5.1. A sound and comprehensive package*

A first group of interviewees can count on some kind of resources stemming from public welfare, the family and the market. Moreover, some of the resources they can rely on are characterized by continuity and/or generosity, that make their impact on the overall individual welfare rather relevant. Being able to somehow lean on all the main pillars reduces their degree of vulnerability, since if one of them should – even temporarily – drain away, they could still count on the other two.

In fact, they both receive public income support and have access to public activating measures. Moreover, their package is complemented by a relevant support from the primary network. This takes the form of income support, housing support (e.g. co-habitation with the family of origin, or partner's parents, or with a partner who owns a dwelling or pays a rent), but also emotional support as well as information about the functioning of PES, the entitlement to welfare schemes, or acquaintances who might offer a job or

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<sup>4</sup> Resources stemming from Third Sector bodies have been considered as "public welfare" intervention if NGOs implement – entirely or partly – programmes that represent in fact institutional schemes, even if experimental or local.

affordable housing solutions. A few of these respondents also report a help from the solidarity network (Trade Unions, local associations, parish), that completes their diversified package of resources. Interestingly, around half of the interviewees we classified in this group lives in the British and Swiss cities, that belong to liberal welfare models.

*“My income is made up of unemployment benefits, health care benefits and housing benefits. When it was known that they were not going to extend my contract, my employer contacted the public unemployment agency, and then I got a letter from them saying ‘we send your papers’. So accessing unemployment benefits was basically organised for me... this was great. Also, the unemployment agency has some good new initiatives, such as employers-jobseekers speed-dating, and if you need help from them, you can always ask, about how to write a CV, etc. [Besides sending out CVs] I took short [undeclared] jobs to have an extra income. I went to France for 10 days to pick grapes – a job recommended by a friend. When it is really necessary my girlfriend helps me out” (M-30).*

### 5.2. Counting on diversified resources

Most of our interviewees dispose of a rather diversified package of resources, even though more limited than the previous group. Around one third of the respondents, disregarding age, sex, origin or city they live in, can be classified in this group. Their welfare leans at a certain extent on all three pillars, and they show a balanced agency, pursuing some access to public welfare, some attempts towards labour market integration, and cultivating relations with family and friends.

Anyway, the patchwork contributions they manage to put together is not enough to lift them over a threshold of vulnerability. They often declare they really need each piece of help they get, even though it costs them a lot to obtain it, otherwise they would not be able to make a living.

*“My brother and I live with our uncle. We both have seasonal works every now and then. We also get social help. We live well, but always on the edge: we must spend very carefully in order to afford basic things, like food and bills” (M-25).*

*“Having to sign on [for benefits] was the most mortifying experience ever, the attitude of other people can be demoralising as you can't just walk into a place and ask for a job now. I would have moved back in with my parents, but I have two siblings still living there and the space is tight. So I moved in with my grandparents: I am not sure how I would manage without their support” (F-23).*

### 5.3. Relying upon public welfare

A number of our respondents report a rather unbalanced package of resources, that relies mainly on public welfare support. Apart from the interviewees of the first group, these are the ones who access most to public income support. They have a weak link to the market; they receive some help from the primary network, but this is often limited to emotional and information support, or irregular monetary transfers; only a few of them live with their family of origin or their partner's one.

This package is more often found among men than women, and mostly present among the “marginal and weak” profile, characterized by long-term unemployment, personal and family difficulties (§ 4.4). It is, on

the contrary, least present among the interviewees with a (creative) professional project, who seem more interested to strategically look for professionally-oriented experiences rather than to solicit entitlement to welfare measures.

This “public-welfare” package is more typical in the cities of the occupational, universalistic and liberal welfare models, where entitlement to welfare measures is a subjective right and – if conditions are fulfilled – payment is assured as long as the need lasts. This means that social assistance and housing support are neither marginal in generosity, nor just paid *una tantum*. In the continental model also family allowances are generous and have a real impact on household disposable income when children are present.

*“I receive 1000€ per month from the training program, and 430€ family allowances for the children. When I started to work for the Municipality I had a priority access to social housing because I lived far away; I also get 400€/month housing benefit. The father of my son is in prison and I don't have a good relationship with my family, except for my sister who sometimes helps me with the children. Sometimes I put them at the [public] after-school centre. I have very good and friendly relations with the staff of the "Second chance School", where I also received useful information. I got psychological support from my friends and from other students I met at [the activation programme] school” (F-25).*

On the contrary, interviewees in Southern and Eastern European cities less often live on an “all welfare” package, since social assistance entitlement in these contexts is more uncertain, and duration of support more depending on budget constraints and discretionary power of case-managers.

The risk for these interviewees derives from the uneven character of their resource package. If their entitlement to public welfare should expire, or generosity or inclusiveness of public measures should be downsized (also linked to the current crisis), their possibility to make ends meet would be seriously jeopardized. They cannot count much on family support, since either relations are strained, or their families suffer from resource scarcity, too. In this sense, the vulnerability of the “marginal and weak” profiles (§ 4.4), who are also particularly disconnected from labour market, risks to be accentuated.

#### 5.4. Depending on the family

A small but significant group of interviewees overwhelmingly relies on the support of primary network. Both their housing solutions and income maintenance depend on the help of their parents, partners, parents in law, and/or friends. They either continue living with their family of origin, or go back to live there after a period of autonomy, once they lose a job and cannot afford living independently anymore. In other cases, they live with siblings or partners, or alone, but they can do so because they have inherited the property of a dwelling or the entitlement to live in social housing from a parent or grandparent. Parents and/or siblings contribute with monetary transfers as well, or – in case of co-habiting partners or relatives – take care of all bills and utilities. Friends, together with relatives, are often gatekeepers of information and important for psychological support and motivation. Public support seems to play a limited role, or is something they indirectly benefit from, due to income pooling with their family members (e.g. family allowances, illness benefits or old-age pensions of their relatives). Rather vague appears also their initiative to achieve labour market (re)integration, pointing at quite undefined migration or self-employment projects for the future.

*“I live with my sister in a semi-public [cooperative] apartment. My grandmother used to live there; when she moved in with my parents, my sister and I decided to*

*move in the empty flat. My sister is employed with a temporary contract [her sister's boyfriend, permanently and full-time employed, also lives with them]. My parents support me financially since I lost my job. I never applied for any kind of support from the local labour office, the officials aren't nice; I am not even registered as unemployed. All members of my family cut their expenditure on holidays, leisure, sport. My friend, who lives in Korea, helped me to arrange a-month stay there, where I would like to find a job in the future" (F-25).*

Women have more often an "all family" resource package because they depend on their life partner's income, and bear care responsibilities of young children. Men with such a resource package, instead, generally rely on their parents, with whom they still live, being also very young (under 21); only one older man (32) lives alone, but strongly depends on his mother's and brother's help.

As far as origins are concerned, natives rely heavily on their family more often than migrants. This might be related to the fact that native families have long established and better embedded chains of relations that produce resources for the further generations (such as housing property or entitlement, welfare rights that contribute to the family income pooling, connections, information, etc.). As to precariousness profiles, young people with a past *interrupted career* more often show an unbalanced resource package, bending toward family support.

Most of these interviewees live in cities belonging to countries in transition. Coherently, interviewees not receiving any public income support are overrepresented in these cities as opposed to all the others, and especially to universalistic and liberal ones. Also overrepresented in Eastern cities are respondents who report not having been involved in any activation measure either, whereas the large majority of the young interviewed was involved at least in one programme in all the other cities.

The risk of these young persons lies in family overburden. If the family should be charged with additional responsibilities, and/or its income capacity should be reduced, for instance because of another family member losing his or her job, the family collective capacity to cope with its members' vulnerability would be severely jeopardized. Also, if the relations of these respondents with their relatives should for some reason deteriorate, they would risk to lose their main – or only – source of support. In both cases, building a relation to public welfare agencies from scratch would need time, information, and also psychological and emotional energy, difficult to mobilize for individuals that were never acquainted with those channels ("I didn't consider asking help at the centre for social care because I think that is shameful", F-21).

##### *5.5. A limited resource package*

This is the most preoccupying group in our sample. It gathers young people that can count on very weak (or even absent) resources from all the main pillars. Their vulnerability is the highest, since they can barely make ends meet. The primary network support they receive is often confined to information or emotional help. Most of them receive no income support (unemployment benefit or social assistance) at all, and one third of them did not access any activating programme. In some cases their situation is the result of the worsening of a previous situation, for instance because their entitlement to income support expired. In some others, it is perceived by respondents as a transitional situation towards the achievement of a better situation, because they are about to reach the age when they are eligible for monetary transfers, or because they are on a waiting list to join activating programmes, or to access social housing.

The young with a migrant background, are clearly overrepresented in this group, as opposed to natives.

*“In Bulgaria I started working at 13 after my mother died. When I moved to Spain, I had many temporary jobs, cleaning houses and in food factories. I live with my [unemployed] sister and her son. I can only find temporary jobs, with irregular durations, so I cannot plan my life. I have applied for housing support, economic support for myself and child support for my sister, but I haven't received anything. I don't understand which criteria are used to decide who gets what kind of support. I have [only] been able to access courses of Spanish through some NGOs. No relevant help came from my family; some friends have helped me, lending me some money” (F-24).*

Interviewees living in Southern European cities are concentrated in this group, thus confirming the weakness of public intervention in these contexts and the fact that – when the family support is low – no other pillar is really able to lift people over a threshold of dangerous vulnerability.

As far as vulnerability profiles are concerned, the young *precarious with fragmented paths* (§ 4.3) show more often than other interviewees a limited resource package. This calls for attention, since they seem to derive the resources for their own welfare mainly – if not entirely – from their labour market participation that is very discontinuous and is apparently not pointing toward improvement or stabilization. In this sense, this sub-group shows the strongest commodification, and the highest vulnerability among our respondents.

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper presented the preliminary results of the analysis of 120 interviews with precarious young carried out in 20 European cities. These young people are not totally unemployed and excluded from the labour market, rather they are confronted to the discontinuity and low quality of their jobs and life chances.

We investigated individual and social factors at the basis of their vulnerability, identifying five profiles of precariousness that differ by the degree of weakness and fragmentation of their path, the coherence of experiences they accumulated, the length and quality of their past jobs and the duration of their unemployment spells, the presence or absence of a professional project. Precarious young workers that are neither characterized by a specific professional project nor have been able to build a somehow coherent – even though fragmented – career path, show the weakest profile.

We, then, identified five different types of resource packages our respondents rely upon, comparing their size and composition, distinguishing the contribution of the various “pillars”: public welfare, market-based, primary network, and solidarity network. Whereas some respondents show a rather balanced resource package, leaning on all main pillars, two groups of interviewed young overwhelmingly rely respectively on public welfare and on their family and primary network, while a last group has access only to a scant set of resources. Those who can count on a particularly weak or unbalanced resource package, leaning almost exclusively either on public welfare or on the support of family and friends, are in the most risky position, since if that pillar should fail, they would be entirely exposed to contingencies.

The situation of the young who are deeply detached from the labour market due to long-term unemployment or severe precariousness with no professional plans, and who – at the same time – can rely on an uneven or frail resource package, bear the most severe risk to end up economically deprived and socially excluded.

Disregarding their profile and resource package, though, our respondents describe strategies to cope with their conditions of instability that are similar across European cities.

A recurrent overall strategy is the postponement of steps towards autonomy and adulthood (exiting parents' household, living in couple, having children, etc.) or even, for some of them, taking a step backwards, going back to live with family. All resources available in the – even extended – family are put together in wide income pooling strategies. Nevertheless, depending on their family stresses and depresses young adults, who feel “late”, compared to their peers who have achieved autonomy. Those who have come back to live with their parents after a period of autonomy complain of a sort of personal regression, and of being “treated as a child”.

Even more widespread is the severe reduction of expenses. This means not only renouncing to everything that is not indispensable (leisure, sports, holidays), but also cutting on basic goods (e.g. reducing health expenses or food quality), bearing debts (on utilities, dwelling rent, car insurance, etc.).

Interviewees search to increase their income level by different means; many have borrowed money from relatives and friends, or from social services; some report selling family goods (like minor real estate properties, or the car), or renting a room in their dwelling, if they have the possibility to do so; others undertake minor illegal activities (street traffics). Some are developing migration projects, or even thinking about extreme solutions, such as “selling ovules”, or “having children” in order to receive family allowances and have priority for social housing.

Similar across European cities is also the negative impact of unemployment and precariousness on the overall well-being. This is a classical sociological subject, from Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeifel (1933) onwards. Despite the deep changes employment has undergone in the last decades, being permanently integrated in the labour market still maintains a strong dimension of sense and identity for individuals. Our young interviewees share clear feelings of distress, including anxiety, sadness and loss of confidence and self-esteem, negativity and loss of strategy for the present and of perspective for the future. These views at the same time lead to and are reinforced by difficult family relations, psychological and health problems, such as depression, rapid changes in weight, obesity. Some report an effort to maintain a routine: waking up early, carrying out everyday activities, doing (cheap) sports, etc. Others, on the contrary, are losing their everyday organization, sleeping and lazing around all day long (“I didn't do anything anymore, I stayed in bed the whole day. I wasn't alive anymore”), feeling worthless and useless, or even plunging into despair (“Unemployment is negative, one needs to work, otherwise day after day you feel you are wasting your time, you feel useless and you see no perspective, you are afraid you will finish your money. You are not motivated and you think about your situation again and again as in a loop”).

In this sense, the role of employment policies can be crucial in the path of young people through instability. Admission to activation programmes like training courses and protected jobs is fundamental also for the recuperation of young people's motivation, organization of time and self-esteem (“At first I felt really bad. Now, since I am in the programme, I don't feel like an unemployed anymore, and it's getting much better”). The risk that – due to the current crisis and budget constraints – these programmes may be cut down or strictly linked to short-term results, threatens their potential support to young people in their search for autonomy and self-realization.

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