



Italian Young People Through the Lens of Youth Policies¹

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ABSTRACT Previous attempts to classify youth policies emphasised the importance of the underlying “concept of youth”, which sustains and legitimises specific policy measures. The aim of this study is to identify, through a bottom-up approach, the main orientations which characterise recent youth policies in Italy. Twelve documents (published from 2012 to 2016) at the national, regional and local levels are analysed through content analysis. Four main policy orientations emerge, each characterised by a different representation of young people and solutions/aims. Representing young people as talents often implies an orientation toward skill development; seeing youth as a resource is often associated with the promotion of their possible contribution to the society. Negative representations of youth (as vulnerable and as problems) characterise protective solutions. Each approach is characterised as well by specific risks, strengths and supporting institutions. A useful framework for the analysis of youth policies at the national and international levels is discussed.

KEY WORDS young people; youth policies; framing; representations; Italy; policy analysis

Introduction

Young individuals represent a sector of population that requires specific attention from European institutions. Since the economic crisis in 2008, European youth unemployment rates have been persistently high at around 20 % on average (Caliendo and Schmid 2016). In Italy, even before the effects of the economic crisis came to a head, the situation for young people was already unfavourable: their activity rate was 30.9 % (compared to an average of 44 % recorded in the EU27), and their employment rate amounted to 24.4 %, compared to an average rate of 37.5 % in the EU27 (Dota 2010). Italian young adults tend to leave their parental home later than in other EU countries in order to avoid falling into a persistent poverty state (Ayllón 2015), with a negative impact on other social sectors. In this situation, institutions have the opportunity and the responsibility to influence the status quo,

Sociální studia / Social Studies 2/2018. Pp. 75–96. ISSN 1214-813X.

¹ The research reported in this paper was funded by the European Union, Horizon 2020 Programme, Constructing AcTiveCitizensHip with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions (www.catchyou.eu), grant agreement number 649538. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

moderating the impact of the economic crisis through specific policies which can guarantee the individual's access to education, training, labour market, and welfare.

A youth policy could be defined as “the overarching framework of governmental (and sometimes non-governmental) activity directed towards young people: at, for and with them” (Williamson 2011: 135). Youth policy is often considered a marginal field of social policy, and in many countries the idea of youth as an object of social policy is not really acknowledged (Wallace and Bendit 2009). Moreover, the status of youth policies is in continuous evolution and different institutions focus on different priorities. For these reasons, youth policies are highly diverse not only between countries, but also within countries, being often decentralised towards the regional/local level and the voluntary sector.

To make sense of such complexity, some attempts have been made to classify national youth policies according to a variety of dimensions, resulting in interesting analyses that were published until 2011 (Wallace and Bendit 2009; as regards the Italian context, Villano and Bertocchi 2014). In this article, we examine a selected number of Italian policy documents which were published in the period 2012–2016, in order to describe how the specific representations of and discourses about youth (including both adolescents and young adults) sustained and legitimised the policy measures.

Youth policies in Italy

In his reconstruction of the history of youth policies in Italy, Mesa (2010) identified several stages. Starting from the local experimentation of the early youth projects initiated in the second half of the 1970s, the process culminated, in 2006, in the opening of a policy sector at the national level by establishing a special Ministry (named “Youth Policies and Sport Activities”). This Ministry was identified as the Italian representative in European arenas on youth policies (POAT 2014). In 2008, the centre-left government was replaced by a centre-right government, but the proxy for youth policies was maintained in a separate and ad hoc Ministry (the Ministry for Youth). Then, from 2011 on (except for a few months in 2013 with the “Ministry for Equal Opportunities, Sport and Youth Policies”), youth policies were delegated to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Youth and National Civil Service, currently in charge of the sub-secretary of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy.

In this system, due to lack of coherent policy at the national level in the 1980s and 1990s, the regions became more important for policymaking, bringing the locus of governance closer to young people and localities (Bazzanella 2010; Villano and Bertocchi 2014). More recently, two national organs became relevant for Italian youth policies. The first one is the ministerial ex-department for youth, which in 2012 was replaced by the Italian Department of Youth and National Civil Service. Second, the National Youth Agency (*Agenzia Nazionale per i Giovani*) is an autonomous organisation, established in 2007 under the auspices of the Italian government and the European Commission. All these actors contribute to define a heterogeneous picture that is characterised by a general discontinuity in resource allocation (Government of Italy n.d.), and suffering also from frequent budget cuts (Guidi 2014; Andersson et al. 2017).

Representations of youth in policies

The rejection of rationalistic visions of policy-making, which would start from the assumption that policy ideas always emerge as responses to objective and well-known problems, suggests that experts and interest groups facing similar problems can promote different solutions (Béland 2005). In this sense, critically analysing the ways in which policy language constructs and represents policy problems is important, as these discursive constructions have implications for how institutions are invoked to think about (and justify) possible policy responses (Bacchi 2009). Indeed, the representation of youth that is (more or less explicitly) driven by policies has a key role in, and is part of, the process of “problem structuring”: this is probably the most crucial task in policy development, since if a problem is not structured appropriately (i.e. if it does not adequately represent the social or political issue), policy will fail in reaching its goals (Dunn 1981; see also Bradbury 1989).

In more general terms, this idea is consistent with considering social representations as a useful framework for making sense of what institutions consider as socially significant actors and phenomena (Howarth 2006). For this reason, social representations have an impact on political discourses, laws, and regulation (Andreouli and Howarth 2012; Andreouli, Howarth and Shose 2014). Wallace et al. (2009: 444) suggest that the underlying “concept of youth”, defined as the extent to which young people are seen *as a problem or as a resource*, represents an important factor that distinguishes youth policies in different part of Europe (see also Chisholm, Kovacheva and Merico 2011). This is consistent with the work by Walther, Moerch Hejl and Benchmann Jensen (2002), who suggest that the ambition of such problem-resource-thinking is to provide a useful categorisation-instrument concerning different youth policies (Walther et al. 2002). In this regard, previous analyses in Italy have shown that the political agenda tends to see them more as a “problem” than as a “resource” (Villano and Bertocchi 2014).

However, such a dualistic classification has received some criticism, since the distinction between problem and resource is not defined by absolute criteria and depends on how young people are evaluated by institutions (Walther et al. 2002). In this sense, the classification of youth as “problem vs. resource” does not clearly explain much more than a general evaluation of youth in positive or negative terms by society. The first aim of our work was thus to obtain, thorough a bottom-up approach in the study of youth policies, a more detailed description and classification of the underlying representations of youth in the Italian context.

Second, the importance of studying the representations of youth mostly resides in the claim that, even in the absence of clear evidence, there is a relationship between the underlying representation of youth and the specific aims/solutions which are proposed by a policy (Wallace et al. 2009; see also IARD 2001; Andersson et al. 2017). Thus, a further aim of our study was to investigate such relationships, identifying and describing recurrent connections. Both aims were pursued analysing a group of Italian policy documents.

In summary, the purpose of this manuscript is thus to describe and to classify the underlying representations of youth in a sample of Italian youth policy documents and to investigate the relationships between the underlying representations of youth and the specific aims/solutions which are proposed.

Method

Our research was conducted in the framework of the H2020 project *CATCH-EyoU (Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth)*. Following the project protocol, researchers used different strategies to identify possible candidate documents for analysis. Web searches through search engines and databases were accompanied by direct requests for suggestions from policy experts at the national and regional levels (policy makers, politicians, representatives of youth organisations).

More specifically, the web searches were based on the consultation of online archives containing many regional youth policies, like [Politichegiovanili.it](http://www.politichegiovanili.it)². Ad hoc Google searches were performed combining the search term “youth policies” (in Italian) with the name of each Italian region. The request for suggestions from policy experts at the national and regional levels was performed in a previous interview-based study, part of the *CATCH-EyoU* project (Cicognani and Amnå 2016). Such experts were asked to identify documents that could well represent the point of view of their institution.

Because previous analyses of Italian youth policies were published before 2012 (e.g. Villano and Bertocchi 2014), a preliminary list of documents published between 2012 and 2016 was created. The list was drafted by the first three authors and it was revised by the others. All the documents were freely available online.

Due to the lack of a broader national framework on youth policies in Italy (as a specific policy domain) and the regional specificities in the way youth policies are addressed, we included in the analyses different types of documents. Indeed, for the purposes of this study, we took advantage of documents produced at the national level within other policy areas which target young people (e.g. employment). Moreover, we also considered policy documents which were produced in some Italian regions during the time interval of interest, and these we considered particularly interesting examples of the different approaches and heterogeneity which characterise the Italian context. All the documents were available online as full texts.

Table 1 presents the final list of documents that were selected and analysed. It includes documents that can be located at different geographical and institutional levels. The documents were produced by different institutions (public and private), demonstrating the overall trend towards cross-sectoral cooperation in the formulation of youth policies. More specifically, documents 1–3 refer to the national level, while documents 4–12 refer to the regional-local level. Documents 2 and 3 were produced by youth organisations, while documents 1 and 4–12 were published by governmental agencies (at the national, regional, and local levels). Overall, the selected documents reflect the importance of inter-professional and cross-sectoral cooperation among the social, health, and education services as a strategy for community development.

As regards the legal and practical value of the documents, our list mostly focuses on strategic plans of action, due to the possibility of linking, in the same document, the specific social framework (depending on the problem structuring) with the specific aims/solutions. The formal value of the legal documents, as well as the practical consequences of the policy implementation (see (McLaughlin 1987), were not the focus of our work.

² <http://www.politichegiovanili.it/>

In this sense, even with a great deal of variability across different dimensions, including the public/private sphere and the level of abstraction, all the documents contained a reflection on condition of Italian youth, accompanied by actions.

Table 1: Documents list

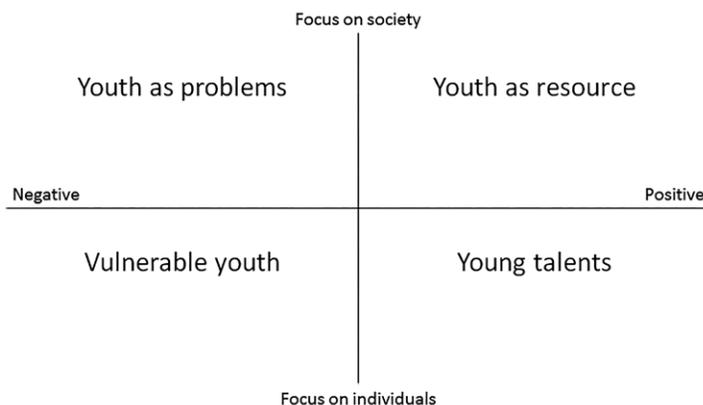
N.	Document name	Level	Main policy area	Age group	Publication year
1.	Italian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan	National	Employment – school to job transition	Young individuals (around 15–29 y.o.)	2013
2.	Italian Youth Forum – Plan of actions 2012–2015	National	Multiple	Young individuals	2012
3.	Direct contact with second generations – Our Manifesto in 10 points	National	Multiple	Young individuals (from children to young adults)	2014
4.	Promotion of wellbeing and risk prevention in adolescence: "Project adolescence", Regional guidelines	Regional (Emilia Romagna)	Health	Teenagers	2013
5.	Approval of the agreement on youth policies between Region Emilia Romagna and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Youth – year 2013, "Evolved and aware youth"	Regional (Emilia Romagna)	Youth engagement	Young individuals (around 14–30 y.o.)	2013
6.	Strategic guidelines for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Piemonte – years 2014–2015	Regional (Piedmont)	Employment – school to job transition	Young individuals (around 15–24 y.o.)	2014
7.	Youth Plan 2013 – Approval of calls "Creation, improvement, and continuity lab and business incubators and youth spaces"	Local (Province of Novara - Piedmont)	Employment – innovation	Young individuals (around 15–30 y.o.)	2014
8.	[All youth are a resource. Aims and strategies of "Bollenti Spiriti", programme of the Region Puglia for youth policies 2014–2015]	Regional (Puglia)	Employment – innovation	Young individuals (around 15–24 y.o.)	2013
9.	Regional law, March 22, 2012, n. 5 Law for youths' autonomy and for the Guarantee Fund for their opportunities	Regional (Friuli Venezia Giulia)	Multiple	Young individuals (around 14–35)	2012
10.	Regional law, February 1, 2016, n.1 Norms about youth policies – further specifications	Regional (Umbria)	Multiple	Young individuals (around 14–35 y.o.)	2016
11.	Regional law, October 14, 2011 – and Annex A Approval of the "Three-year program 2010–2012" of interventions for youths	Regional (Lazio)	Multiple	Young individuals (around 14–35 y.o.)	2011
12.	Regional law, August 8, 2016, n. 26. "Building the future: New politics for youths"	Regional (Campania)	Multiple	Young individuals (around 16–34 y.o.)	2016

The process of analysis started with the reading of each document several times to familiarise with its content. Statements describing youth (young individuals, youth as a category, or related sub-groups) were thus identified. In a second step, following a thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), each statement was then grouped according to its more or less explicit representation of youth. Statements were analysed by two researchers. Results were revised by a third researcher.

Results

Most of the documents under analysis fall within multiple policy areas, including employment, school-to-job transition, civic and political engagement, and, to a lesser extent, health promotion. Most of them consider a broad range of ages (from 14–16 to 30–35 years old) as final beneficiaries of the actions. In the analysis, we identified four main representations of youth in Italy, which we labelled as follows: *vulnerable youth*, *young talents*, *youth as problem*, and *youth as resource*. These four representations can be placed on a plane that is oriented by two axes, which correspond, respectively, to negative–positive and individual–societal perspectives (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The four main representations of youth in Italian policy documents (2012–16)



Considering the complexity and the articulation of the documents under study, it is not possible to determine a single representation of youth characterising each document. In a single document, we often registered more coexisting representations of youth and multiple aims. For example, in document no. 8, the representation of youth as resource coexists with some references also to youth as victims: “youth are the main victims of the crisis and the only way to get out of it” (pp. 3–4). Similarly, in document no. 4, the representation of vulnerable youth coexists with some references to youth as resource. To have a more detailed picture, Table A1 (in Appendix) summarises the different representations of youth that are present in each document, with examples of quotes. In the same table, there is also a synthesis of the main

aims which characterise each document. From our analysis of this group of documents, we present here some conclusions about the relationship between youth representations and policy aims.

Vulnerable youth

This representation of youth characterises documents that describe youth who, due to their condition, face specific challenges that result in possible diseases, vulnerabilities, or suffering. For example, the vulnerability of youth is quite well exemplified by document no. 4, from the Regional Service of Family, Children and Adolescents of the Emilia Romagna region. The document refers to adolescents' main issues in terms of "risk behaviour" and, specifically, school dropout, bullying and violent behaviour, and addiction. These are all related to the vulnerabilities that teenagers face in their psychological development and to the lack of healthy relationships and/or supportive environments in their lives. Similarly, document no. 12 (from the Campania region) refers to "risk factors and juvenile deviance" (p. 1). Sometimes, the vulnerability is attributed to specific sub-groups, due for example to their health and gender. In this regard document no. 3, which was produced at the national level with reference to immigrant youth, particularly emphasises the vulnerabilities connected with an immigrant background. On the other hand, documents no. 1 and no. 6, which regard the implementation of the Youth Guarantee programme at the national and regional levels, describe youth as vulnerable because they have been particularly damaged by the economic crisis. A similar reasoning can be found also in documents no. 11 (Region Lazio) and no. 8 (Region Puglia).

The representation of youth as *vulnerable* appears useful to justify educational and caring approaches (as in document 4), in which youth are framed as users/targets of the services. This is the case for some interventions in the field of health promotion and risk prevention, which are carried out by regional institutions. However, we can also note that minor references to this representation are also present in documents authored by youth organisations. In such cases, the description of youth as vulnerable is useful to justify the specific attention for this sector of society.

Young talents

This representation characterises documents that refer to young individuals in terms of their knowledge, skills, and competences, without explicitly referring to the relevance of such qualities for the community or society. This describes document no. 8 from the Puglia region which, even if in a few sentences, attributes some positive qualities to youth. In some cases, youth are described as talents with reference to their possible return to the region of origin or the assignment of ad hoc prizes (document no. 9, from Region Friuli Venezia Giulia). Recognising youths' talents can also be the basis for justifying a participative approach (as in document no. 9) or to further support a representation of youth as a resource (like document no. 3), as described in the section below.

The representation of youth as *talents* is enough to justify investments in such talents, as well as the promotion of skills development and new forms of youth entrepreneurship

(see document no. 7). For example, paraphrasing document no. 9, we can say that as much as the institutions recognise the qualities of youths (including their autonomy), the more they support their realisation. Recognising youths as talents implies the necessity of a collective effort to assist such talents to grow up. In practical terms, this representation allows institutions to propose measures which consist of the creation of a fertile environment in which the intrinsic talents of young individuals can develop.

Youth as problem

This representation of youth characterises documents that describe specific aspects of the youth condition that represent a possible threat to their communities. In this regard, we found that a minority of policies in our study considered youth as problems for the society. Among them, policies about the implementation of the Youth Guarantee programme (no. 1 and no. 6) emphasised the negative social impact that youth unemployment has for the EU and for society in general. However, we must also recognise that, rather than communicating the idea that “youths are themselves the problem”, these documents adopt the problematic representation to argue the idea that “youth problems (like unemployment) should be taken seriously” by the whole society. In other cases, youth are described as possible sources of problems in the documents that have to do with bullying and cyberbullying phenomena (document no. 10, from Region Umbria).

The focus on youth *problems* (e.g. in documents 1 and 6), rather than prescribing a specific role to youth, appears to be useful to justify a policy focus on a specific issue (like unemployment). Indeed, according to this logic, addressing some specific “youth issues” represents an instrument to protect society, defending it from a possible threat. In this sense, the adoption of this representation of youth by institutions is useful to demonstrate that, in any case, the adopted measures will be useful for the whole society, and not only for a specific sector (i.e. young individuals).

Youth as resource

This representation characterises documents which focus on the possible contribution that, under certain conditions, youth are able to give to their communities and to society in general. Among the documents that more explicitly exemplify this perspective we have document no. 8 (Region Puglia) and 10 (Region Umbria). Document no. 8 consists of a set of interventions and actions to allow the young citizens of Puglia to take part in all aspects of their community life. The idea behind this programme is to clearly consider youth as a resource and not as a problem. The explicit focus is on youths’ power and willingness to participate. This idea is reflected also in the role that is attributed to youth, that is, as “active actors” in a process of regional and community development. Document no. 10, from the beginning, states that the region acknowledges youth as an essential resource for the community. In document no. 5 (from Region Emilia Romagna), young people are described as a resource and an incentive for the development of the local community, capable of making a significant contribution in terms of knowledge, expertise, creativity, and innovation. In document no. 11 (Region

Lazio), youth are seen as co-producers of goods and services, and in document no. 12 (Region Campania) they are described as wealth for their territories.

It is only the presence of the representation of youth as a *resource* (e.g. in documents no. 4, no. 5 and no. 7) that justifies the explicit inclusion of some policy aims that concern an increase in youth contribution to society. This is the case, for example, of document no. 9, in which considering youth as an “essential resource” implies the centrality of youth policies as a “necessary condition for innovation, sustainable development, and the human, social, occupational, cultural, economic growth of the region” (p. 1). In other words, considering youth as a resource implies making an effort to provide young generations with the opportunity to actively take part and contribute to the life of their community in all its domains, including the political sphere. Similar to the representations of young individuals as problems, the adoption of this representation by institutions is useful to demonstrate that, in any case, the adopted measures will be useful for the whole society, and not only for a specific sector of it.

Discussion

In this contribution, we described four main representations of youth that emerged from the Italian policy documents under study: vulnerable youth, young talents, youth as problem, and youth as resource. Previous research (Wallace et al. 2009) has suggested that it is possible to distinguish between policies that consider youth as problems versus a resource. However, this distinction appeared mostly focused on the evaluation that society makes of youth, who can respectively represent a “source of problems” or a “source of solutions”. This distinction thus does not cover the broad spectrum of policies in which youth are described both in terms of their intrinsic characteristics and their relationship with society. In the following paragraphs, we discuss each of the representations we identified, in the light of the literature.

Vulnerable youth

Among youth, it is possible to identify vulnerable groups who, for many reasons, require specific attention from authorities and institutions. This idea of youth is implicit in the Italian Constitution, which in Article 31 states “The Republic [...] protects maternity, childhood and youth [...]” The state thus appears particularly interested in specific minorities that may be considered “vulnerable” because of the conditions and threats that characterise their generation, their health, and their economic or migrant status. The most vulnerable young people are, for example, those from multi-problem families: immigrants, young homeless people, uneducated rural youth, school drop-outs, and some ethnic minority youth (Suriala 2006).

In the documents under study, like nos. 3 and 4, we found some specific referrals to these categories and we suggest also that others could be found in policies which are not usually labelled as “youth policies” (e.g. health, assistance etc.). We must note that one of the documents (no. 4) that adopted this representation specifically focused on adolescents. Indeed, from a policy point of view, each life phase is characterised by different desires

and needs, and adolescence may represent a particular “vulnerable period” (Wolf et al. 2004: 74).

Moreover, in the documents we analysed (like documents nos. 1, 6 and 8) we also found that young individuals in general are increasingly considered vulnerable and disadvantaged, mostly for economic reasons. As suggested in the work by Guidi (2014), in recent decades youth has progressively become a vulnerable segment of European societies. Indeed, the 2008 crisis, recession, and austerity politics have exacerbated the already existing difficulties of European young people, especially in some countries (Eurofound 2014; OECD 2014). In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the transition to adulthood has been and continues to be uncertain and frustrating for many European young people (Cordella and Masi 2012; Heinz 2009) and in this sense, they represent a vulnerable group.

Youth as talents

Instead of focusing on vulnerabilities and deficits, this representation focuses on the unique positive qualities that characterise youth. For example, one of the documents under analysis (no. 11) refers to “youths’ creativity and talents in relation with professions of visual arts, music and multimedia”. The EU also attributes to them many qualities and skills. Indeed, “Young people value friendship, respect, tolerance and solidarity and this generation is perhaps the highest-educated, technically-advanced, and most mobile ever” (European Commission 2009: 2). These arguments are used, in Italy and at the European level, to support the development of young people’s talent and entrepreneurial skills (Council of the European Union 2012).

However, even if helping young people to develop their talents is a worthy enterprise, some authors also warn about the risks connected with considering talent development (e.g. through highly competitive calls) the main goal. More specifically, they stress the importance of encouraging high-potential young people to develop their talents towards relational altruistic life trajectories as opposed to egoistic individualism (Ambrose 2003). Indeed, from a pedagogical point of view, excessive egoistic individualism can lead young individuals away from optimal self-fulfilment and will incline them to make unethical sociopolitical decisions when they inherit socioeconomic and political power.

Youth as problem

Historically, in Italy the representation of youth as “problems” was common during the first years of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Indeed, in that period we faced an increase in publications about drug addiction and juvenile delinquency, with a new series of studies on the youth condition and related issues (Mesa 2010). More recently, as suggested by the documents under study (no. 6 in particular), the problem of youth is increasingly related to economic issues. This is consistent with the fact that the representation of youth “as a problem” may prevail in periods of economic crisis and political instability (IARD 2001). At this regard, Chevalier and Palier (2014) recently reported that the social problem of “youth” emerges when there is a misfit between the compulsory school-leaving age,

entry into the labour market, and access to full social citizenship, since it raises the problem of personal financing during this period (see also MacDonald and Marsh 2001).

We believe that the representation of youth as problems is quite risky, to the extent it contains the risk of confusion (and even identification) of individuals with their problems, while it could be better replaced by the idea of youth with problems (see also Suriala 2006). Indeed, the concept of “problem youth” refers to young people with objective and intrinsic problematic qualities. The responses to such problems imply the construction of alliances with other societal sectors. On the other hand, the concept of “youth problems” emphasises the fact that young people may face many specific problems (like unemployment, labour market insecurity, increased economic dependency, polarisation, weak social security, use of alcohol and drugs, psychic and psycho-physical symptoms, and so on) which are historically and geographically located and do not exclude young individuals for their solution.

Youth as resource

The fact that youth are possible resources has ancient origins. As noted by Ambrosi and Rosina (2009), the Latin word “iuven” (young) has the same root word of the verb “iuvare” that means “to be useful, to contribute” to the common good. According to this, a number of scholars suggest that the future and the success of our society depend on youth (Bazzanella 2010). However, our results also emphasise that the specific contribution that youth are supposed to make to society can vary across policies, for example in terms of knowledge, expertise, creativity (document 5), and innovation (documents nos. 3, 5 and 8), for the co-production of goods and services in the communities (document no. 11).

These ways of considering youth as a wealth for their localities and promoting their participation in society, are also consistent with the World Programme of Action for Youth (United Nations 1996: 25): “The capacity for progress of our societies is based, among other elements, on their capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of youth in the building and designing of the future. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilise support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account”. From this point of view, considering youth as resource represents, to the extent it does not remain a mere rhetoric exercise, a real opportunity for giving to the younger generations the opportunity to act and to influence our society as (real) citizens.

Concluding discussion

One of the advantages of our proposed typology is that it defines some dimensions (negative–positive and individuals–society), according to which each policy can be placed on a continuum, taking into account the possibility of coexisting representations. The four representations can be summarised in two–dimensional graphical form, where the two axes respectively correspond to negative–positive and individual–societal perspectives. Each youth policy can be graphed as a single point (e.g. talents or resource), or as more than one. The latter was the case for most of our documents, in which the different representations can coexist by supplementing and accentuating each other.

Moreover, our study found preliminary and original evidence of a possible relationship between representations and aims of youth-related policies in the Italian context, and this may have important implications. When youth is described in terms of *talents*, it means that they should be provided with the best opportunities for development. For example, in document 7, one aim was to guarantee access to spaces in which youth can develop their creativity and their interests. When youth is described as a *resource*, society can receive a functional gain by letting them have a protagonist role in their communities. For example, in document 12 one aim was to acknowledge youths as protagonists and active citizens, as an important contribution to individual and community wellbeing. On the other hand, when youth are perceived as *vulnerable* or as *problems*, other measures are more willing to be taken: such as taking care of them within the framework of health promotion and risk prevention (as in document 4) and protecting society from negative consequences (document 6). Our work could thus be translated into useful inputs and questions for the policymaking process. Which representations of youth are policymakers endorsing? Are the proposed solutions consistent with such representation? We believe that this line of thought can lead to an improvement in the quality of national youth policies, according to the most recent EU directives.

The implications of our approach also have to do with the representations of youth and their participation in society. Indeed, as expressed by Jones and Gaventa (2002: 13) “the way in which people understand themselves as citizens is likely to have a significant impact on their rights and obligations and on whether they participate, in what form and why”. In this sense, it is reasonable to believe that the specific role that is attributed to young individuals will influence the way in which they act as citizens (see also Benedicto and Morán 2007).

The fact that we found many references to youth in the positive space of the graph in Figure 1, is consistent with a temporal perspective of analysis, suggesting that in recent decades there has been a gradual shift in Italy from a protective approach by public institutions to the promotion and development of young personalities in transition (D’Elia 2006). This shift is consistent with a similar European tendency in the late 1990s that placed the representation of youths as vulnerable/problems, which is changing in the 21st century (Helve, Leccardi and Kovacheva 2011). However, we warn that focusing on young individuals’ knowledge and competences (i.e. talents) without explicitly referring to the relevance of such qualities for the community or society (i.e. resources) could lead some “talented” individuals to gain an advantage from the policy implementation, leaving others behind and creating a stratified system.

Finally, some limitations of this study should be recognised. First, we focused on a small sample of policies that are mostly relevant at the national level, without considering, for example, the EU level. However, we believe that this work extends the conceptual coordinates for the analysis of youth policies, which could be useful for a future comparative analysis at an international level.

Second, from our non-representative sample, it was not possible to systematically compare differences related to the geographical and institutional level (e.g. national vs. regional) and the related level of abstraction (e.g. general strategic documents vs. “actual” policy documents). Related to this point, another limit of this analysis is that by focusing on the explicit content of the policy documents, we did not consider the potential

consequences of their concrete implementation. However, by focusing on the “problem structuring” of policies, we do not want to reduce the importance of their implementation. As reported by some authors (Mesa 2010; Villano and Bertocchi 2014), in Italy there is a large gap between the rhetoric of institutional principles and the real praxis of youth policies. In this sense, it is possible that though a document emphasises the idea of youth as talents or a resource, it is not followed by a concrete plan to give value to their qualities. To overcome this limit, future research could triangulate the sources of information. For this reason, the CATCH-EyoU project devotes specific attention to how policies are concretely received and implemented by politicians, public officials and youth organisations.

Table A1: Representations of youth and aims of youth policies – Examples from the documents

Policy	Aim/Instruments	Youth representations			
		Vulnerable	Talents	Problem	Resource
1.	To ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive an offer of good-quality employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship (p. 1).	unemployed and discouraged youth, who need to receive adequate attention from the structures responsible for active labour market policies (p. 1) Young people are definitely the age group most affected by the present employment crisis (p. 2)	the full development of youth's potential (p. 1)	[youth] exclusion and social marginalisation (p. 1)	Youth organisations [are] the section of society that constantly acts and is civically involved, in order to guarantee a better future for future generations
2.	Personal development and integration in society are the main challenges (p. 1). The authors want to promote practical policies focusing on the main issues of young generations, with the aim of serving their country (p. 1).				
3.	The document has four main sections (work, education, culture and sport, and participation and active citizenship) (p. 1). Ten concrete solutions are proposed, to be adapted to the specific local contexts and needs (p. 3): 1. To promote specific training for teachers aimed at the management of multicultural classes 2. To develop actions supporting schools, psychological care and linguistic-cultural mediation 3. To strengthen families' involvement in school 4. To build a school/employment orientation and transition-integrated system 5. To recognise and enhance non-formal and informal competences 6. To incentivise labour market internationalisation 7. To enhance and favour the conservation of the culture of the country of origin and to strengthen connections with Italian culture 8. Sport: toward a sport citizenship 9. To develop information services concerning rights and participation opportunities 10. To favour the forming of associations, active citizenship and equal opportunities	Students with a migration background have a higher risk of school dropout (p. 5) For second generation migrant youth, the actual opportunities are reduced for finding a stable job that is appropriate and corresponds to their familial and personal aspirations (p. 6). As regards identity, second generation youth must balance between different and sometimes conflicting worlds: the migrant world and the native world (p-6)	Second generation individuals do not experience the same linguistic and cultural abstracts as their parents: they communicate also through the dialects of their classmates and they own the same cultural codes (p. 2)		The cultural and linguistic background of second generation students, who often speak more languages and know other world areas, could be recognised as a positive resource for Italian schools (p-6) [...] cultural and linguistic skills represent resources that can certainly [...] contribute to very useful innovations in organisational and production processes (p-6)

Policy	Aim/Instruments	Youth representations		
		Vulnerable	Talents	Problem
4.	<p>The document identifies intervention strategies within the framework of health promotion and risk prevention. In particular, it stresses the importance of inter-professional and inter-sectorial collaboration and integration between social, health, and education services as a strategy for community development for wellbeing promotion.</p> <p>The aim of the guidelines is the promotion of health and wellbeing. The authors suggest that we all desire wellness, but the question is "how can policies guarantee to be promoters and producers of wellbeing, especially in such a complex and changing life period as adolescence?". Wellbeing as a key objective in the first article of the law itself and places it as a necessary condition to enhance social, cultural and economic development of the society (p. 5).</p>	<p>specific needs and characteristics make adolescents particularly vulnerable and this may also facilitate the use of substances and problems of addiction or distress (p. 34)</p>		
5.	<p>The youth policy GECO3 has different aims:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To implement innovative policies for young people, arranged between various institutional levels 2. To value best practices and territorial vocations, by paying attention to the smaller realities and those most in need of financial or planning support (p. 9) 3. To develop activities in the aggregation spaces with particular emphasis on the promotion of individual and social skills, adolescents' creativity, active citizenship, and leadership (p. 9) 4. To promote projects aimed at strengthening civic engagement, volunteering, healthy lifestyles education, and responsible participation 5. To promote communication between the existing experiences, to spread useful information for youth, and monitoring the experiences 6. To promote youth aggregation centres as spaces in which it is possible to work on youth empowerment, through bottom-up methodologies, participative planning, and peer education 7. To strengthen and qualify these intervention areas in order to make these experiences more rooted at the regional level, maintaining a strong focus on the weakest situations, operating according to the construction of an organic system of interventions (p. 9). 		"Evolved and aware youth"	<p>To recognise young people not only as a social category characterised by disease, but as a resource and an incentive for the development of the local community, able to give a significant contribution in terms of knowledge, expertise, creativity, innovation (p. 7)</p>

Policy	Aim/Instruments	Youth representations			Resource
		Vulnerable	Talents	Problem	
6.	<p>The aim of the Regional plan is coherent with the Italian and EU directives (p. 36).</p> <p>The main idea behind the plan is to adopt a common frame, connecting all the public actors that can support the implementation of the programme. It identifies the target, the public actors in charge of evaluating the process, and the criteria/indicators for evaluation. It provides a detailed analysis of the situation of the target group and describes the strategies, the actions (training, training on the job, apprenticeship, financial support) to be implemented and the amount of money devoted for those actions.</p>	<p>Young individuals have been particularly disadvantaged by the economic crisis (p. 36)</p> <p>Youth are increasingly in competition with older workers, who often have more experience. Moreover, if they are able to find a job, it is often temporary.</p>		<p>In some areas, youth unemployment is particularly high. It is not only a problem that concerns unemployed youth, but it is a great threat for the social cohesion of the EU and it could have negative effects on the economic potential and on the competitiveness of Europe. Youth unemployment generates negative effects not only for youth, but for the whole society] (p. 44)</p>	
7.	<p>The document consists of two public calls, in the fields of work/occupation and creativity and talents:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The main aim of the first call is the promotion of creativity and (non-technological) innovation, through new youth entrepreneurship. The aim is to develop cultural and creative skills that are at the base of creativity and innovation. 2. The main aim of the second call is to guarantee access to spaces in which youth can develop their creativity and their interests, spending their free time fruitfully there. 		<p>Creativity and talents (p. 3)</p>		

Policy	Aim/Instruments	Youth representations			
		Vulnerable	Talents	Problem	Resource
8.	<p>The aim is to value the contribution of youth in these fields, not only as the target of public policies, but also as active participants in an innovation and developmental process of the territory and of the communities (p. 2).</p> <p>Five aims mentioned as strategic are the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To allow hidden resources and potentials to emerge 2. To enhance youth training and learning by doing 3. To support youth projects and initiatives until they become autonomous 4. To create an open intervention system for youth 5. To make Puglia a welcoming region for new generations 	<p>youth are the main victims of the economic crisis</p>			<p>[Youth as] active actors in a innovative developmental process of territories and of communities (p. 3)</p>
9.	<p>Regional interventions are aimed at promoting active citizenship, in order:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To sustain their planning and creative skills; 2. To support their participation in the development of policies for them; 3. To promote individual and collective responsibilities (p. 1). 		<p>The region recognises the autonomy of youths and supports their development (p. 1)</p>		
10.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To promote the realisation of an autonomous life project 2. To develop youth policies to guarantee an adequate education 3. To support youths' creativity and their cultural and artistic creations 4. To support the implementation of the system of competency certifications and qualifications in specific sectors of the job market 5. To promote youths' autonomy, in order to foster youth mobility, international exchanges, and access to EU programmes 6. To promote civic and political engagement of youth, supporting active citizenship, innovative forms of participation in decision making processes, and the establishment of youth organisations 7. To support the residence of youths in the region (i.e. avoiding brain drain), creating job and training opportunities 8. To promote the creation of new means of information and communication which are devoted to youth 9. To promote education for justice and non-violence 10. To participate in activities to support peace and human rights 11. To pursue gender equity 12. The prevention of social diseases and health education 				<p>youth as essential resource of the community (p. 1)</p>

Policy	Aim/Instruments	Youth representations		
		Vulnerable	Talents	Problem
11.	<p>1. The construction of an integrated information system to facilitate youths' access to initiatives at the regional, national, and EU levels</p> <p>2. To offer specific trainings to promote youths' interest for local and traditional professions</p> <p>3. To enhance youths' creativity and talents in relation with professions in the visual arts, music, and multimedia</p> <p>4. To support a network for the creation of welcoming environments for youths</p> <p>5. The promotion of the culture of legality among youth (pp. 18-19)</p>		<p>youths' creativity and talents in relation with professions in the visual arts, music, and multimedia</p>	<p>the youth sector of society, not only as users, but also as co-producer of goods and services (p. 1)</p>
12.	<p>1. To promote virtuous relationships between youth and adults</p> <p>2. To pursue the wellbeing and positive development of young adults and their families, to increase social cohesion and the collective cultural and economic development</p> <p>3. To promote policies that value youth and support developmental and professional trajectories, based on autonomy and merits</p> <p>4. To promote cultural exchanges, respecting international norms and programmes</p> <p>5. To support the Euro-Mediterranean sense of belonging</p> <p>6. To acknowledge youths' protagonism and active citizenship, as an important contribution to the individual's and community's wellbeing</p> <p>7. To promote interventions and services for youths which guarantee easy access, respect, healthy life styles, and reduce violence</p> <p>8. To support the acquisition and the enhancement of skills and competences in young people; to support, through formal and non-formal education, their access to the job market</p> <p>9. To prevent and reduce youth disease, risk factors, and youth deviance, through projects, initiatives, and good practices</p> <p>10. To promote education for justice, the participation in activities to support peace and human rights</p>	<p>Juvenile diseases, risk factors, and youth deviance (p. 1)</p>		<p>youth as a resource of the territory and as a fundamental and essential resource for the community (p. 1)</p>

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