

To the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

This contribution is from the ALL-YOUTH project, funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland. It was written by a working group of University of Tampere researchers: Professor Jukka Viljanen and university teacher Heta Heiskanen (public law), Professor Päivi Honkatukia, post-doc researchers Jarmo Rinne and Tiina Rättilä, and researcher Miia Lähde (youth research). Professor Viljanen also interviewed leader of the TRUST project (Academy of Finland key project) Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto and researcher Jaakko Tuominen on the situation of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in Finland.

Challenges faced by young people in Finland

The challenge of social exclusion

It is commonly declared in public discussions that most young people in Finland are doing well, and the general level of well-being is high among the Finnish youth. According to various indicators, Finland has achieved excellent results in education, digitalisation, and civic knowledge. At the same time, the share of young people who are on the brink of social exclusion has not significantly decreased. Approximately 16% of people aged 15–24 are neither employed, nor in education or training (Eurostat 2015). Youth unemployment and dropping out of the system have been sources of public concern in recent years, and investments have been made to reintegrate these young people into education and working life.

Activation and support measures have been introduced to reduce the number of young people at risk of marginalisation and enable them to access employment, further education, or training based on their needs or life situations. In Finland, like elsewhere in Europe, these measures focus mainly on young people's positions in the labour market as a criterion of 'good' citizenship. Young people are encouraged to become active, 'employable', entrepreneurial citizens and productive workers. The focus on working life risks bypassing dimensions not related to that area of life, which can be of crucial importance in terms of young people's everyday lives, their position in society, and socio-ecological sustainability in general.

With regard to young people's norm-breaking and deviant behaviour, in recent decades Finland has followed the Nordic 'humane' and 'rational' line, according to which these social problems are to be dealt with mainly outside the criminal justice system. Therefore, imprisonment of underage youth is avoided, and only a handful of young people under 18 years are incarcerated. The problems related to non-conforming behaviour are mostly dealt with within the child welfare system, where confinement is used, but the aim is to provide care, treatment, and support. Little research-based knowledge exists on these practices. Current studies also give a mixed picture about the meaning and implications of those intentions. Similarly, little is known about the position of underage asylum

seekers and the practices of the specific institutions in which they are placed. Children, young people, and young adults who are placed in the above-mentioned institutions are all vulnerable in terms of their everyday living circumstances. Their involvement in designing, evaluating, and monitoring the quality of care and treatment is a topical approach designed to improve the practices from the perspective of children's and young people's participatory rights, but in practice the results have not been very impressive. More research is needed to identify the obstacles to young people's active participation in institutions where confinement is used.

Challenges to the level of participation among young people

The political and societal activity of Finnish young people in the mid-2010s can be characterised as twofold, with a growing discrepancy between institutionalised (conventional) and non-institutionalised (non-conventional) forms of participation. On the one hand, the youth's electoral turnout clearly deviates from the older generations in all elections from the local to the EU level, which has engendered much public discussion and concern about the political alienation of the young. On the other hand, while conventional participation and involvement in politics among the Finnish youth have been diminishing for a long time, their non-conventional participation has been on the rise. The young are especially motivated by forms of self-organised activism, such as pop-up events and urban environmental projects, and they actively use various platforms provided by social media channels for the purposes of networking, communicating, organising mobilisation or campaigns, and exerting political influence (Storsul 2014; Statistics Finland 2017). The problem from the point of view of research is that our knowledge of this new kind of (individualised, contingent, and transient) societal and political activity among the youth is still very scarce, and no reliable statistical data exist on it that is comparable to the data on institutionalised participation.

Challenges to traditional forms of participation

For example, in the 2015 parliamentary elections, only 47% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 took to the polls, compared with the 80% turnout in the 55–69 age group. While it has been long known that education plays a significant role in the electoral activity of all citizenry, according to recent research, the difference in turnout between youths with a higher level and lower level of education is dramatic. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, in the 25–34 age group, the turnout of those with higher education was 2.5 times greater compared to those with only basic education (Grönlund & Wass 2016). Results such as these are a clear indication that one of the central barriers to the societal and political participation of the youth in Finland is connected to the level of education, and through that to stark differences in the youth's civic skills and social capital. Moreover, education also influences the attitudes of the youth towards the future. Young people with a lower education place less trust in their future prospects and opportunities to influence societal development than the more highly educated youth.

However, even if the Finnish youth's electoral activity is according to every account rather low, it is important to note that – like the older generations – they share a strong trust in the basic institutions of Finnish society, the democratic system, the judiciary, and the police. However, young people's trust in government, parliament, and especially politicians has controversially decreased in recent years (ICCS 2016). In concert with this decreased trust, another controversial aspect relates to the youth's knowledge of society and politics. While a number comparative studies show that the Finnish youth's civic knowledge in terms of society and politics is at a very high level internationally, their sense of civic competency (i.e. belief that one can affect government policies) and involvement in politics are worryingly low compared to other Western countries (see, e.g. ICCS 2016; Borg et al. 2015; Elo & Rapeli 2008). According to education specialists, one of the core reasons behind this is the lack of civic education and the practice of civic skills in the Finnish education system, a problem that has persisted since the early 1980s. More recently, however, this issue has been recognised by the state, and civics courses have been added to the national curriculum, particularly at the elementary school level, along with training for young people in the form of mock elections.

A new type of participation is increasing

Young people today prefer modes and arenas of activity that allow them to realise their own ideas, self-presentations, and projects concretely in the here-and-now, in contrast to the ideologically committed party politics of the old style, or even the NGO-style of participation that was popular before the era of social networking technologies. This development is in line with the growing trend among the young of 'life politics' and 'identity politics', as noted by contemporary sociological and political science research.

The increasing importance of self-organised activism can also be detected in the Finnish youth's future expectations. Young people's trust in their opportunities to shape their own lives in the future is surprisingly strong considering their low trust in politics and political parties (Seppänen 2008; Kuhmonen & Kinnunen 2017). On the other hand, there is an alarming gap within the youth between those who engage in self-organised activism and those who drop out or are excluded from all kinds of societal activity (the latter are currently estimated to number in the tens of thousands). Coupled with the youth's increasing experiences of various forms of discrimination, marginalisation, sexual harassment, and hate speech, Finnish society is facing a grave challenge in the form of the gradual estrangement of a growing number of young people, also including young immigrants, from their rights to active and effective citizenship.

Examples of discrimination against young people in the exercise of their rights

According to the results of the most recent report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Finland turned out to be one of the most discriminating countries in Europe (EU-MIDIS II, <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/eumidis-ii-main-results>). For example, 47 percent of immigrants originating from Sub-Saharan areas had experienced discrimination in Finland, such as harassment, staring, insults, threatening comments, or threats of violence. The respective share in Sweden was 38 per cent, while

in the United Kingdom, the figure was 15 per cent. The experiences of discrimination, whether in the form of everyday racism, discrimination in job applications, or structural forms of discrimination, also concern young people. For example, racialised young people's experiences of discrimination and harassment in public places are reported to be rather common, and young women and those representing visible minorities in particular report not feeling safe while moving in public spaces (e.g. Tuominen et al. 2014).

The protection of the rights of young asylum seekers has weakened since 2010. Recent Finnish governments have redrafted legislation on immigration and asylum to include stricter conditions on family reunification, shorter residence permits, and broader competences for expulsion and deportation. This means that exceptional circumstances for family reunification are needed, and even young asylum seekers are deported to their country of origin. The practice of special school classes for young asylum seekers has been criticised by those taking them. According to interviews, young asylum seekers feel segregated from other students. In Finland, the accommodation of young asylum seekers is not based on family housing, but rather on institutions (group homes), which also delays their integration into Finnish society. Since the 2015 immigration crisis, the length of asylum proceedings has also meant that they become adults during the process and can be deported (e.g. Kuusisto-Arponen 2016).

Are you aware of policies and programmes aimed at supporting young people to realise their rights? If so, please describe them

Finland has a reputation for being at the European forefront in developing youth policy approaches. Youth-related policies in Finland are realised through integrative measures and in specific strategies. Integrative measures refer to general policy instruments where policies related to the realisation of the rights of young people are included. In addition, there are specific youth policies and programmes aiming to support young people. The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for the overall development of youth work and youth policy.

The new Youth Act (1285/2016), which replaces the previous Youth Act from 2006, came into force in 2017. The purpose of the act is to strengthen young people's opportunities to participate in and influence their community and society more generally, and to advance young people's equality, support their development, and improve their living conditions and rights. According to the law, these are the key principles guiding the youth work and youth policy in Finland, and they are aligned every fourth year in the **National Youth Work and Policy Programme**, which is the key means of youth policy planning and supervision, and it is also informed by the Government's general programme. The first youth work and policy programme covers the 2017–2019 period.

Integrative measures: NAP

The major human rights policy instrument in Finland is the National Action Plan on Fundamental and Human Rights (NAP), which has been carried out twice by two different governments. However, NAP has no separate budget as such. The first NAP (2012–2013) included 67 projects. Of these projects, the youth guarantee project (*Nuorisotakuu*) [\[PH1\]](#)

and the project on mental health services for the youth were among the priority measures. The aim of the youth guarantee was to support the access of those under 30 years to working life.

In the second NAP (2017–2019), references to youth-related human rights projects have increased. Among the 43 projects, several youth-related projects make references to the recommendations of international human rights bodies. Among the measures of the second NAP, some are more general in their nature, whereas other projects focus on vulnerable persons among the youth. The plan identifies a number of central human rights problems related to the Finnish youth, including unequal opportunities in schooling, hate speech, ethnic-related bullying in schools among children, dropping out of school, and the lack of family-type foster homes. Selected measures for improvement include human rights education and the introduction of a digital youth channel to increase and strengthen youth participation and combat hate speech.

Human rights education at the primary and secondary level aims to increase the youth's awareness of human rights. The aim to integrate human rights education in schools has been included as part of the national curriculum that guides every school in Finland. Furthermore, the NAP includes projects to empower and improve the ability and skills of teachers to provide inclusive teaching. Consequently, the responsible authority, the Ministry of Education and Culture, organises training and education for teaching staff.

Furthermore, the NAP includes the development of the Nuortenideat.fi website, which is an open platform where youth can participate by sharing their own ideas and taking part in political processes. However, it remains to be seen how effective this initiative will be.

Hate speech-related measures include several projects that aim to increase interaction between different youth groups in order to decrease exclusion and racism. One of the key projects is *Merkityksellinen Suomessa* (Relevant in Finland), which facilitates interaction between immigrants and locals through free-time recreation and other shared activities. Another project specifically targets young asylum seekers via voluntary work and NGOs. Other general human rights programmes targeted at certain groups of people also include references to youth. These programmes have included Roma policies (<http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/72788>, pp. 39, 41), particularly in relation to the right to education, access to the labour market, and the rights of disabled peoples (<https://www.thl.fi/fi/tutkimus-ja-asiantuntijatyo/hankkeet-ja-ohjelmat/suomen-vammaispoliittinen-ohjelma-vampo>, http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/74810/Rap%20ja%20mui_2016-14_verkkoversio%20100316.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, pp. 26–27, 71–72), and access to the labour market, education, and youth housing. However, it should be noted that currently there is no up-to-date programme on Roma issues or the rights of disabled persons.

How are youth organisations or youth-led structures involved in developing, implementing, monitoring, and/or evaluating policies and programmes on youth in your country?

In principle, youth organisations have good access to participate in the development of youth policies and programmes through committees and hearings. Furthermore, in principle, local youth councils (*nuorisovaltuusto*) also often have access to different types of written hearings via the internet (lausuntopalvelu.fi). However, in practice, the overall participation of the youth in forming policy is not high, and participation demands a significant amount of time and resources from those who do participate.

A good example of the facilitation of youth participation in developing the monitoring of the youth policies is from 2017: a new follow-up instrument on the level of trust of the youth regarding society and the future was introduced as one of the national sustainable development indicators (Agenda 2030). As a sustainable development indicator, the theme will receive adequate attention and regular monitoring, making the visions of the youth visible to policy makers. This instrument was proposed and developed by a new youth group, Youth Agenda 2030, which was appointed by the Ministry of the Environment and facilitated by Allianssi in 2017. The Youth Agenda 2030 group was chosen after an open call, and it is composed of 17 young people.

The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs has used twice a youth group to develop its foreign and security policy (2008–2009) and its EU policy (2013). The members were selected on both occasions following an open call. The groups suggested their visions on future policies.

What measures at the international level would facilitate/support the realisation of young people's rights?

It would be beneficial to conduct a study in the context of the rights of young people and the European Court of Human Rights. The study could illustrate the specific features of the realisation of the rights of young people and would facilitate the discussion of whether there is a need for a specific procedure for young people. The Council of Europe has prepared several fact sheets in relation to specific groups of people, but there is no specific fact sheet on youth. Such a fact sheet would make the specific features of the realisation of the rights of young people more visible and transparent.

Any other issues you would like to share with the OHCHR?

In the development of the hearing mechanisms and practices for legislative preparation, there are no specific procedures for young people in Finland. In practice, youth representation occurs through appointed members of NGOs, youth politicians, or workers from youth NGOs. This results in a low level of participation. One of the challenges has been that during the planning of the current procedures, aspects of youth friendliness have been disregarded. To remedy these problems, the multidisciplinary ALL-YOUTH project, funded by the Finnish Strategic Research Council, will engage in developing and

testing new models of youth participation and youth impact assessment in legislation and policy-making for the 2017–2020 period.

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UN Human Rights Committee 2013 (CCPR/C/FIN/CO/6)

Recommendations from international human rights supervisory organs

UN CESCR 2014 (E/C.12/FIN/CO/6), UN CERD 2012 (CERD/C/FIN/CO/20-22))

UN Special Rapporteurs (UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples' Rights 2011 (A/HRC/18/35/ADD.2

UN CRC 2011 (CRC/C/FIN/CO/4)

UN CEDAW 2014 (CEDAW/C/FIN/CO/79)

CoE of the Committee of Ministers on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages 2012 (CM/RecChL(2012)2

CoE Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muižnieks Report on Finland 2012 (COMMDH(2012)27)

CoE Committee of Ministers Resolution on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Finland 2012 (ResCMN(2012)3)

UPR 2013 (A/HRC/21/8 and A/HRC/21/8/ADD.1)

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