

# Sensing the Futures?

Reflections after the Stockholm Meeting

## YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT FEBRUARY 2017

<i>EU</i>	<i>17,3%</i>
<i>Euro Area</i>	<i>19,4%</i>
<i>Italy</i>	<i>35,2%</i>
<i>Greece</i>	<i>45,2%</i>
<i>Spain</i>	<i>41,5%</i>
<i>Sweden</i>	<i>18,2%</i>
<i>Portugal</i>	<i>25%</i>
<i>Slovenia</i>	<i>14,5%</i>
<i>Malta</i>	<i>12,9%</i>
<i>Bosnia approx.</i>	<i>60%*</i>



*“Europa” (2012) by Swedish artist Johanna Gustafsson Fürst. Two trash bin holders are united through a frail piece of black cloth while standing on unstable window sills on wheels.*

## Introduction

What is a useful understanding of youth unemployment today? How can we create a sense of empowerment and hope in a time where there is talk of a “lost generation” and constant stream of alarming statistics?

Since the financial crisis of 2008, an entire industry of projects tackling the devastating lack of jobs has emerged and continues to grow. It spans a large variety of methods: financing programmes, job training, workshops, educations, apprentice- and intern positions and so on. And they certainly have a hard task to solve. Not only are youngsters lacking income and stability - they are in fact deprived of hope in the future and, ultimately, in themselves. Millions of youth across Europe are living in a new kind of uncertainty, which is not only economical but indeed existential and mental as well.

One does not need to look far back into history to know how dangerous this is. The past decade of intensified political extremism; polarization and intolerance seems all to be related to the labour crisis and is therefore yet another reminder of how vulnerable and interdependent our democracies are. The European project - whether we mean the EU or the general movement for an open Europe - is here facing its most dangerous challenge in a long time.

What incentives will there be for openness and unity in the future, if an entire generation is left out?

The INCOME-project, acting at the intersection of culture and economy through the co-working space format, will perhaps become one way to answer these questions. With an eclectic mix of members from around Europe, it is an opportunity to explore new ways of how to achieve greater job sustainability and opportunities across traditional formats, borders and methods. But in order to get there a crucial starting point is of course a critical overview of where and why we are at this situation, including an analysis of *how* we talk about these issues and *what* our conceptual understanding is.

## 1. Unlearning Unemployment

Obviously, the meaning and consequences of being young and “unemployed” twenty (or even ten) years ago differ from how it is today. The speed with which the labour market conditions are changing have escalated and given rise to a confusing paradox: a fragmented but at the same time globalized market, where it is hard to form a general understanding based on national perspectives. Add to this the new digital landscape and its manifold impact on how work is defined, performed and distributed – and, of course, free lance and self-employment markets. Who is unemployed this economy?

The simple and brutal answer is of course still: the one without income. The hard facts are as hard as ever – but they have to be situated in a new light if we are to understand it beyond the doomsday scenario that we currently tend to surround it with. Even though youth unemployment is undeniably a very noticeable phenomenon in most parts of Europe, the category and generalization that is implied with the term is problematic and often not very helpful when you think about it. Apart from obvious facts such as regional and cultural differences, “youth unemployment” as a general term does not tell us much about the myriad of issues and processes that led up to the situation. Instead, it flattens the agenda into a simplicity and deceptive rhetoric that is being repeated like a mantra in political reports and decision-making. Everyone wants to fight youth unemployment – but can we do so unless we have a critical dialogue of what we mean by it? Can we even talk about unemployment as a separate issue, without critiquing our economical and political systems?

## 2. Who are the youngsters?

A similar complication occurs when we are talking about “youth” in generalized terms that – despite the best of intentions – often obscures the actual people behind the statistics, who are a far more diverse and complex category than what the traditional “youth unemployment”-narrative may reveal. Both news media and politics often lack a culturally sensitive understanding and nuanced view of youth, which is particularly problematic when institutions try to communicate and visualize their projects. Young people rarely identify themselves as the monolith “youth” addressed in mainstream media and countless brochures and websites about unemployment – simply because age is not a very unifying quality in the way that would be convenient in the current discussion climate.

However, rejecting all attempts of describing the current generation out of work would also be wrong. There are of course unifying factors as well, and sometimes we have no choice but to try to conceptualize “the youth” unless we want to get lost in semantic specificities. The historical condition still provides a certain “grammar” of possible reactions that, although hard to see until after some time has passed, does provide a kind of framework to understand *how individuals react* rather than who they possibly are.

As rhetoric, youth unemployment therefore has to be handled with care. Any communication around these issues must be judged by what it does rather than what it is trying to say, if we really want to reach out and engage.

## 3. The co-working space in perspective

When discussing the word “co-working space” it is clear that there is not one definite understanding of what that actually means. Indeed, some projects use it as part of their communication and marketing while others have either avoided it or simply not had a good reason to use it if it does not have any established connotation in their region. And of course, the much talked about “rise of the co-working space concept” in the new millennium is often simplified far beyond the reality it tries to describe.

First of all, not all “co-working spaces” are named so. There is a great number of different organizations, physical or digital spaces and concepts that are in fact collectives of very diverse groups of professionals without seeing themselves as co-working spaces, let alone labelling themselves as such. In fact, one might ask oneself what would *not* be a co-working space, since

even the most conventional of offices or any other traditional institutions often incorporates at least some elements that resemble the model of shared space.

On the other hand, co-working spaces in the more literal sense or with the “hipster” understanding of the word, has of course had great impact as well. It is typically freelancers within the creative fields that have adopted the concept and sometimes used it to brand and formulate their identity. From this follows a general association with the co-working space term with progressive ideals, a younger and creativity-based economy, gentrification and self-marketing. Established co-working spaces range from commercially successful examples in prestigious locations with their own administrative staff to more informal and low-to-non-budget ones operating in abandoned industrial buildings. Some are spontaneous and self-organized associations while others have some funding and are part of political initiatives to support socially challenged neighbourhoods or communities. The partners of INCOME represent pretty much all of these different versions, which in itself is a great resource.

One should perhaps not focus too much on the word itself and take the risk of creating a project that sounds good only at face value. Instead, it seems more constructive to look at the actual strategies and working methods that each partner can offer; regardless of how they identify their format. For practical reasons, “co-working space” may of course be convenient to use in communication and descriptions – but only as long as it not becomes a mantra with no actual meaning, which has so often been the case.

## What to achieve, then?

With all the above in mind, what goals are then relevant and realistic for a project like this? How can we formulate an agenda that manages to use a deepened analysis of our time in a way that leads to actual change and useful tools, and not just endless discussions about our problems?

First of all, we must recognize that tackling unemployment is as much about empowerment, identity, creativity, sustainability and non-institutional co-operation as it is about strict statistics, financing and so on. These so-called “soft values” therefore have to be integrated into the tonality and identity of the project, which could be done simply by stating their significance and include it throughout the discussions. For this reason, the curatorial working methodology may well prove to be an important unifier in the project. The art world have developed a number of interdisciplinary methods that can often be a valuable support to other institutions that are more

strict in their working field. Not through instructing in detail how each partner should act, but through bringing attention to the questions and support dialogue.

Secondly, INCOME consists of an eclectic group of partners; different not only in which regions and contexts they work in but also in methods and strategies. However, they are united in that they are at the forefront of working with youth empowerment in their respective regions and therefore having a first-hand insight into the complex and precarious issues at hand. Most of the participants have experience of using various co-working models or other formats that are more or less similar, but in very different ways. They are in themselves testament to the general tendency towards a more specialized, fragmented and paradoxically globalized labour market where many of the conventional ideas about what constitutes a “job” are changing, and more flexible and inclusive workspaces are needed. Each partner's experiences and impressions carries a lot of valuable information and together form an important reference chart of possible solutions and challenges, all of which we can learn from. To make this diversity visible and actively use it to enrich the discussions is a legitimate goal both for the project itself but also in signalling to future initiatives that this kind of inclusiveness is important. Here, documentation and communication in different channels, not least through social media or a website, is key in order to maximize the scope of the project.

Finally, INCOME itself is a form of “European co-working space” where each participant represents a shared and welcoming platform in a time of chaos and fear. When a more detailed agenda is decided and the job shadowing exchanges are started, the “ambassador” function of INCOME is again something that is an important aspect. A lot of work remains before we know in detail how the project will be structured, but the signal of hope and engagement has a vital role to play in the continued strive for a united Europe.

The INCOME Project therefore has an important role to play. Apart from investigating the potential of the co-working space formats, it could be described as a research project on how we can support and inspire dialogue and activism beyond our many preconceived notions. It has the possibility to include the entire spectrum of issues revolving around how economy works in relation to politics, culture, digitalization, mentality, history, tolerance and much else. And in the end, it may very well be that it is this uncomfortable hodgepodge of factors that is the very solution that helps us to become more sensitive, sensible and inspired if we use it in the right way and share the burden of how to operate in our time. INCOME is part of what will hopefully become a greater movement exploring how an intensified and better-organized exchange of ideas, people and different methods can act as a counterforce when neither traditional institutions nor the economy itself are functioning in the way they used to. Change is

inevitable and difficult - but the co-working, sharing and caring in this project can become a much-needed inspiration for continued critique and activism both in and outside the EU.

