

The Youth Guarantee System in Spain: tailored youth policy or broad-brush employment policy?

Joan Rodríguez-Soler, Autonomous University of Barcelona

Joan Miquel Verd, Autonomous University of Barcelona

1 Introduction

In 2013, in a context in which youth unemployment in Europe had been growing since 2008, the European Commission launched the Youth Employment Initiative and, months later, the European Council established the general framework of European Youth Guarantee. In 2014, the National Youth Guarantee Plan was approved in Spain, which, following the steps set by the European Council, laid the foundations of the National Youth Guarantee System (SNGJ). This system began to be implemented as of September 2014, without having undergone substantial modifications so far.

In this paper we analyze to what extent the design and deployment of the SNGJ in Spain really reflects the objective of developing policies adjusted to the profiles and circumstances of the young population with the greatest difficulties in the labor market. For this purpose, a documentary analysis of the most relevant texts, both European and Spanish, has been carried out. In these documents the SNGJ philosophy is defined, as well as its design and approach. This documentary analysis has been articulated with the analysis of a series of interviews with key actors at different levels (state, regional and municipal) and areas (administration, civil organizations, etc.), linked to the design and implementation of this policy. We also have done 78 structured interviews with national employment policy experts. The information coming from these three sources has been complemented with a third type of documents, issued by different institutions (ILO, CES, ETUI, Eurofound), that describes the deployment of the Youth Guarantee in Europe and Spain.

In the development of this analysis, the analytical instruments of the capability approach of Amartya Sen (1987, 1999) have been mobilized to a large extent. The capability approach provides an unbeatable theoretical framework to assess the real impact of a multitude of public policies. Originally created with the objective of evaluating development policies, it is currently applied to a wide range of areas (Dahmen and Bussi 2012). The basic argument of the approach is simple: policies must be assessed in terms of the opportunities for improvement that they open to the target individuals, and not exclusively in terms of their intrinsic characteristics. In other words, applied measures must be considered in the specific context of people and the circumstances around them -conversion factors, according to Sen (1985)- that allow or not the conversion of resources and formal rights in functionings and real rights.

2 The Youth Guarantee as a policy oriented to needs and the Capability Approach as a rationale for its evaluation

As Hemerijck (2013) has pointed out, there is a slow transformation of some of the public policies that are being applied in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, we see a substitution of the idea of equity based on equality of resources for the idea that equity consists in giving due support to the needs of each one, individually and according to their particular circumstances. This change of rationale can be observed in the design of the European Youth Guarantee. In particular, it emphasizes the idea of offering personalized and tailored guidance and training, so that depending on the profile of the person, one should choose one measure or another within the ‘package’ of the guarantee. In relation to the objectives of the paper this element is of special interest, since it represents an important change of orientation in relation to public policies traditionally developed in Europe.

The change in the logic of provision of services and guidance to the unemployed young population is also based on the idea that young people are far from being homogeneous, partly because of the plurality of biographical situations that, beyond their structural determinants, are the direct result of individual choice (Heinz 2004, Moreno Mínguez 2012). These guidelines of the European Youth Guarantee echo, in part, this diversification of trajectories and plurality of needs of young people, betting for early and adapted interventions to the specific circumstances of each individual (Bussi and Geyer 2013, pp. 12-14).

The capability approach (Sen 1985, 1987, 1999) provides a rationale for the tailored and targeted support that should characterize the European Youth Guarantee, although this framework is not always explicitly referred to. Moreover, this same approach provides a yardstick to carry out the evaluation of policies using the same conceptual tools. In this use of the capability approach as an assessment tool of public policies it is crucial to consider the unequal conversion of available resources into desirable results (Salais 2007; Bartelheimer et al. 2012). In this vein, the analysis of people’s inequality of capabilities -which is not based solely on the inequality of means or resources- requires asking what the personal and social circumstances (conversion factors) cause such inequality. By emphasizing the importance of conversion factors, the focus is placed on the circumstances that may impede or facilitate the transformation of resources -taken as means- into effective freedom (Sen 1985). This is the main reason why Sen believes that evaluation procedures should not focus on resources, but on the conversion of formal rights into real rights (or capabilities). Therefore, from the capability approach perspective, an adequate public policy is one that involves combining the guarantee of rights or goods and services with the transformation of the factors that allow an adequate use of resources. This is the perspective that is adopted in the paper.

3 The Spanish system of Youth Guarantee and its target population

The target population of the Spanish SNGJ is characterized by having a low level of qualification, often due to a premature drop-out of the educational system. Within the European context, Spain is at the lower end of the percentage of young people with second stage secondary education (García 2011), which influences the degree of labor polarization between the group with higher education and the one that only possesses the compulsory secondary level (López-Andreu and Verd 2016). Regarding the European context, Spanish young people are also characterized by high levels of unemployment and temporary employment, and by weak entrepreneurship rates (see table 1). It is also worth noting the concern about the increase in the number of young people who are outside the labor market and the education or training system, better known as the NEET collective. The origin of the proposal to extend the youth guarantee to the whole Member States in the EU is partly due to

the increase in this NEET profile among the youth population (Eurofound 2012). According to Eurostat, in 2013, the year of the publication of the Youth Guarantee Recommendation, the rate of NEET among young people in the EU-28 between 15 and 24 was 13%, while in 2008 it was 10.9. %. In the Spanish case, the NEET youth rate was 18.6% in 2013 and 14.3% in 2008. These rates, for 2016, were 11.5% for the EU-28 and 14.6% for the Spanish case.

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of young people in Spain and EU-28 in 2016 (among young people and NEET young people)

		ESP	EU-28	
Total young people	Unemployment rate 15-24		44,4	18,7
	Unemployment rate 25-29		25,6	11,2
	Unemployment rate 15-29		33,3	14,7
	Long unemployment proportion 15-24		12,8	5,4
	Long unemployment proportion 25-29		9,7	4,5
	Unemployed by education (15-29)	0-2 ISCED 2011	43,4	25,3
		3-4 ISCED 2011	32,7	13,5
		5-8 ISCED 2011	22,8	9,6
	Drop-out (18-24)		19	10,7
	Fixed-term contracts	Proportion of 15-24 people	74,3	43,8
		Proportion of 25-29 people	48,6	22,8
	Young entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurship rate 18-24	2,6	8,2 ^a
		Entrepreneurship rate 25-34	7,8	11,3 ^a
NEET	NEET rate 15-24		14,6	11,5
	NEET rate 25-29		24,2	18,8
	NEET rate 15-29		18,1	14,2
	By labour status (15-29)	Unemployed	12,1	6,3
		Inactives	6	8
	By education (15-29)	0-2 ISCED 2011	10,5	5,6
		3-4 ISCED 2011	4,1	6,5
		5-8 ISCED 2011	3,4	2

Source: Own elaboration from Eurostat and GEM (2017). ^a Average value of the European area (includes 25 countries).

4 Methodology

Sen (1999, pp. 81-82) reminds us that the use of *capabilities* as a metric requires reflecting on what is taken into consideration in the evaluation and what is not taken into consideration. In this sense, if one starts from the objective of identifying to what extent the Spanish SNGJ may have positive effects on the possibilities of a young person to find a job, personal conversion factors are as important as social or environmental factors (Robeyns 2003). This implies -if we want to develop a contextualized assessment of policies, as proposed by the capability approach- that the characteristics of the Spanish labor market cannot be ignored. In a labor market context where employment opportunities for young people are very scarce, the interplay between institutional factors (labor market regulations, labor market segmentation) and social characteristics of young people is crucial. Indeed, the Spanish labor market is

characterized by the enormous disparity and distance in the positions that workers occupy in the existing segments, segments with very little connection between each other (Alonso and Fernández-Rodríguez 2008; Oesch and Rodríguez 2011; Verd and López-Andreu 2012; 2016). These characteristics are an unavoidable element to be considered in the potential use of the resources provided by the Youth Guarantee.

As stated in the introduction, the results that are presented in the paper are based on the analysis of four different types of materials. On the one hand, a corpus of 38 documents considered the most representative at European and Spanish level regarding the design of the Youth Guarantee have been analyzed, on the other hand, a set of 14 semi-structured interviews with key actors at different levels (state, regional and municipal) and areas (policy makers and policy managers) linked to the design or implementation of the Spanish SNGJ have been analyzed. We also have used the information provided of the realization of 78 structured interviews with national employment policy experts. The information coming from these three sources has been complemented with a third type of documents, issued by different institutions (ILO, CES, ETUI, Eurofound), that describes the deployment of the Youth Guarantee in Europe and Spain.

All the information obtained has been analyzed following a strategy of qualitative content analysis, where the different lines of action of the SNGJ (in some cases, embodied in specific programs and services) have been taken into account. The documents and interviews analyzed allowed identifying the overall design and conceptualization of the Youth Guarantee as a public policy, but also the measures implemented in its frame. This analysis has distinguished in the first place between two large dimensions: 1) the general design and approach of the SNGJ, and 2) the specific measures that have been developed within the framework of the SNGJ. Next, the analysis has been deployed around the comparison of the general approach and design, and also of the specific measures with the characteristics of the targeted population, which has been presented in table 1. This comparison has allowed the above mentioned contextualized analysis and the identification of conversion factors allowing or deterring the effective use of the resources of the Youth Guarantee. More concretely, three dimensions have been considered: 1) the characteristics of the target group of the actions adopted (referring to the identification of a priority group or not), 2) the possible resources involved in the design and specific measures deployed in the SNGJ, and 3) the barriers that hinder the implementation of the actions and concrete measures that affect finally to the real effects of Spanish SNGJ measures.

5 Results and conclusion

The set of measures that make up the Spanish SNGJ develop around two main objectives: 1) offering training and retraining to young people who are inactive or unemployed, and 2) promoting their direct insertion in the labor market through the promotion of self-employment or through incentives for hiring. These objectives, given the levels of youth unemployment in Spain, are conceived as priority and urgent. In this sense, the Youth Guarantee arises -or, at least, is what characterizes the ‘spirit’ of the Youth Guarantee at European level- as a ‘shock policy’ with a substantive approach that avoids previous schemes followed in the past, where undifferentiated training and employment policies aimed at young people have been largely ineffective. However, it is worth questioning whether the design and the measures finally contemplated in the Spanish SNGJ really constitute a package of tailored and targeted policies, as advocated in its most rhetorical justification, both in Spain and in the EU, or are generalist policies that hardly take into account the specificities of the group to which they are targeted. This design of tailored and targeted policies is essential if what is desired is to

expand the set of what Sen (1999) defines as *capabilities*, understood in this specific context as the real possibilities of insertion of young unemployed people. Ignoring the conversion factors -understood as barriers to the use of resources and entitlements- specific to young people in the Spanish labor market can cause that the resources and rights that are linked to the SNGJ to have rather scarce effects.

After the analysis, and regarded in general terms, it can be said that the Spanish Youth Guarantee does not imply the implementation of particularly new measures, but rather a continuation of the previously existing lines of action, so that its character of 'shock instrument' is doubtful. The tight implementation schedule of the system has contributed to this, together with the pressure imposed by the financing system proposed by the EU. On the other hand, the role of orientation and counseling towards young people that could theoretically be expected is not observed. This makes it difficult to consider these measures as tailored and addressed to the specific characteristics of each of their potential recipients. Moreover, it does not seem that these measures have taken into account the labor market context in which these profiles of young people are placed, as well as the heterogeneity of this group. In short, the Youth Guarantee cannot be described as an instrument that allows improving -or no more than what the policies prior to its implementation did- the set of job or training options for the unemployed youth.

Regarding the analysis of the specific measures, it should be noted that the training and requalification measures seem to be little present in the Spanish SNGJ. The urgency in the implementation of the SNGJ has forced, in many cases, to repeat existing programs and actions, which were characterized by their lack of tailoring to the youth characteristics. On the other hand, the measures of 'educational come back' that theoretically should be a priority, have little relevance in practice. Regarding the promotion of self-employment and entrepreneurship, it is important to highlight the inadequacy of these measures to the bulk of young people targeted by the policies. Not all the young people have the necessary characteristics and skills to be able to convert the support measures (understood as 'resources') into real entrepreneurship. Using self-employment and entrepreneurship as a strategy for certain profiles of young people with the right training and skills may be effective, but it is not to use them as a generalized way for almost the entire group of unemployed people, and much less to give such a central role to them.

Therefore, it can be stated that the Spanish SNGJ is an instrument that suffers from an overly generic approach and whose implementation has been little flexible and adapted to the real needs of the unemployed youth population -contrary to what is posed at the highest discursive level. The measures developed in its frame can be defined, calling back the notions of the capability approach, as purely formal entitlements or resources, which have very little consideration of the conversion factors of the target population -i.e. the characteristics of the unemployed youth population and of the labor market to which they are supposed to be re-inserted. This limited tailoring is explained by the mimetic application of previously existing actions or measures, which had already proved ineffective in contexts of high unemployment (Verick 2009). The Spanish Youth Guarantee is therefore a policy that has been decontextualized again, which does not seem to be addressing the necessary reforms of previous generalist policies -or at least does not seem to have made the right decisions- in order to adapt the measures to a heterogeneous unemployed population and to diversify and target its contents taking into account the different existing profiles.

Although the intention of the European policy makers when proposing the Youth Guarantee was to develop a policy oriented to the needs of the youth population with greater difficulties for labor market insertion and to overcome the model of previous policies with a generalist approach, it seems that the design and implementation of the Youth Guarantee in Spain has been far from these intentions. Both its overall approach and the specific measures developed within the framework of the Youth Guarantee show a lack of tailoring and targeting to the profiles and circumstances of the population that most needs the resources deployed. This lack of flexibility and diversity of measures is a serious obstacle to ensuring that the resources devoted to the Youth Guarantee are converted into capabilities by the potential users.

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Author's Addresses:

Joan Rodríguez-Soler, M.Sc.
Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain
Department of Sociology
Joan.Rodriguez.Soler@uab.cat

Joan Miquel Verd, Ph.D.
Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain
Department of Sociology
JoanMiquel.Verd@uab.cat